

Kindred

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete



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Kindred

VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

Ryoko disappears after a fight with Washu and Tenchi suspects foul play. Meanwhile Z is on a mission to avenge himself on those who seek to play God. Ryoko is torn and time is running out as she discovers Z might yet kill millions of innocent souls!

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

Well, I'm not sure how I feel about this story for a lot of reasons... but here it is anyway. I'm reserving judgement ;)

This story brings another OVA character into the continuity. Although I'm still working with a TU base, and though I've pretty much said I won't be involving OVA3 characters in my work — I actually lied, because upon discussion with another TM! fan via email, I discovered that there might be a place in my weird AU world for one of them, after all.

Which character am I talking about? In words (or letters!) of one syllable — Z.

I know, I know. I said I wouldn't do it. But I am doing it. Sorry about that!

This incarnation of Z might be somewhat unusual considering his role in the OVA3, but then his OVA3 introduction and usage is (in my opinion) a little bit confusing anyway. There are a lot of things left unsaid and a lot of other things said which really don't need to be. So I've gone back to basics and reworked Z in the context of Tenchi Universe — considering what kind of a man he might be, what would drive him and how he comes to be involved in this whole mess. I've also given him a name beyond his single letter/alpha-numeric appellations, just because it struck me that it's something he really should have.

Smart (or overly geekish!) Tenchi folk will realise as soon as they see his surname where I got it from. (I'm of the geekish persuasion myself, you might have guessed!). Somehow it just seemed appropriate. Work with me. :)

Usual legal info applies.

Synopsis

After the death of Dr Clay and the final defeat of Tokimi, it seems that the dark influence of Kihaku over the universe has finally been laid to rest. But, when Ryoko disappears suddenly after a fight with Washu, it soon becomes apparent that more than just the pirate's petulant temper is keeping her away. Clay may be dead, but his secret lab is far from empty,

as a lone figure shoots through the universe, hungry for answers and revenge.

Z is a man with a mission, and he knows his time is running out. With Ryoko in his power, he knows that luring Washu into his trap should be a piece of cake. When Ryoko realises his story, she finds herself torn. Who will she choose, in the end — the scientist who gave her life, or the man who seeks to avenge all those created against their will?

And even if she can prevent her mother's murder, can Ryoko prevent Z's powerful magic from destroying millions of innocent lives?

KINDRED
A Tenchi Muyo! Fanfiction
By

VraieEsprit

Chapter One

The Planet Heiwa
Three Months Earlier

“And that's your final report, Dr Kure?”

The petite, fair haired lab assistant cast her companion a keen gaze, a slight smile touching her lips as she made a note on her clipboard. “Are you sure that you don't want me to add anything else? The board of directors might be a little easier to persuade if you were a little, shall I say, less abrupt with your analysis?”

“They asked me to take to pieces a completely pointless defence project, and then reassemble it with absolutely no benefits to this planet or to any other.” Her companion folded his arms across his dusty lab coat, meeting her amused gaze with his own, his bi-coloured eyes adding an odd intensity to his expression. “How would you phrase that, Komei-san? There's nothing else to be said. A waste of your time and of my own. We have much more important things to be working on as it is, and you know it as well as I do.”

“Well, if that's your final opinion.” Komei shrugged her shoulders, setting her board down on an empty section of unit as she offered her superior a smile. “I'm going to bow to you, because you call the shots. But don't be surprised if they get angry. You know that they don't like it when you speak blunt to them, Kure-sensei. They only gave you this to work on because they were annoyed by the brusqueness of your last review.”

“That's their problem. I don't really care about what the board want or don't want.” Her companion's eyes became steely, and he shook his head.

“And as for the way they treat you...”

“Anyone would think you were fond of me, Dr Kure.” Komei offered him a playful smile, and despite himself, the scientist smiled ruefully, nodding his head slowly.

“Sometimes you’re the only reason I stick it out at this place.” He admitted. “That and the fact I need their facilities for my own projects. Otherwise I might go join the Science Academy — but Heiwa is a lot closer to home, and I’m sure that this is where the answers are.”

Komei’s eyes softened, and she put a gentle hand on his arm.

“Zakari, you’re starting to become obsessed.” She murmured softly, concern in her violet eyes. “I know you. I know how focused you become on things that interest you, but this is beyond even that. In the three years we’ve worked together, I’ve never known you spend so much time and energy on one endeavour before.”

“This is rather more to me than just a scientific exploration, Komei-san.” Zakari’s brows drew together at her words, and he shook his head, his thick queue of hair tumbling over his shoulder as he did so. “This is the answer to everything — all the questions I’ve had, for as long as I’ve had them. There are so many things I don’t know about myself. Who am I? Where did I come from? Is Zakari Kure even my real name? I’ve been haunted by it for long enough. This place might be the thing which finally clicks those puzzle pieces together. Would you be any different, if it were you?”

“No, I suppose not.” Komei hesitated, then rested her hands gently on his shoulders, reaching up on tiptoes to kiss his brow. “But whatever you discover, Zakari, I’ll still want you in my life. You do know that, don’t you? Regardless of where you came from or who your parents were.”

“Yes. I know that.” Zakari’s lips twitched into a smile, and he eyed her affectionately. “And I’m glad I have a rock to lean on, too.”

“Have you made any progress on this man you were interested in? This old scientist you were researching?” Komei asked inquisitively. “I know you thought he might be a lead — was he?”

“I think so.” Zakari’s expression became thoughtful. “His name and mine bear a lot of similarity. He’s from Heiwa, and this is where I was found. And I’m pretty sure that he had a laboratory, somewhere in the vicinity of this research complex. It might be something to chase up, anyway. If the place is still there, I’d like to know what kind of a man he was, and whether he might be a member of my family. After all, Kure isn’t a common name on Heiwa. It seems a lot of a coincidence to me, if this is

where we both originated from.”

“I see the logic.” Komei’s eyes danced. “Who knows, Zakari-kun, he might be your long lost father.”

“Very long lost... by all accounts he’s been dead a few centuries.” Zakari said wryly. “At least, reported as such in Galactic records. But I’m not looking for a family reunion. Just answers. That’s all.”

He paused, rubbing his temples, and Komei held him at arm’s length, sending him a look of concern.

“Another headache?” She asked softly. “Zakari, you’re working too hard.”

“I’m fine.” Zakari shook his head impatiently. “It’s just too much time in front of glowing, flickering screens, that’s all. I’m all right, Komei. And we do have work to do. You have my report to submit, and me, I have some encrypted file data on this scientist guy to un-encrypt.”

“All right.” Komei sighed, but obediently scooped up her clipboard, moving across to the nearest computer console. “Then I’ll make a start on this. But take five before you do anything else, Zakari. Please. You look worn out... it won’t hurt you to take a coffee break.”

“I suppose not.” Zakari acknowledged. “All right. You win, Komei. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Good boy.” Komei offered him a smile, and despite himself, Zakari found himself returning it. “I’ll be here. It’s not like I have anywhere else I’d rather be, after all.”

Zakari looked rueful, but he made no reply. Instead he slid back the door of the lab, stepping out into the hallway and leaning up against the gleaming white panels. For a moment he closed his eyes against the pulsing, throbbing pain that nestled against his brain, fighting it tooth and nail as he sought to push the sensation away. It had happened before, he knew that. It had begun in his temples and spread slowly and surely throughout his body, until every nerve ending was a burning warning that something was not right.

“But what Komei doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” He murmured, as the pain seemed to flicker and recede from his senses, allowing relief to flood through his body. “And I’m getting better at fighting it. Maybe it is time I looked into prescription eye-care — perhaps I have spent too long glaring at screens.”

His eyes narrowed, as he considered the other possibilities.

“Or, I need to find out the answers to my questions.” He acknowledged

darkly. "Because it's just as possible this is something genetic — something I inherited from a parent — and if it's there, I need to know about it. I need to know how to fight it, and I can't do that until I know who I really am."

He glanced down the hallway, taking in the low ceiling and the flickering bluish lights that flanked his way towards the research institute's below-par cafeteria. Inwardly he grimaced, shaking his head decidedly as he turned the other way, making his way slowly towards the building entrance and the bright natural light of Heiwa's amber sun that glinted occasionally through the slits in the upper walkways and corridors. Natural light was far better than artificial light, he mused, but few could stand the glare of Heiwa's sun for long, and so steps had been taken to shut it away from the people inside.

"But it's never affected me." Zakari acknowledged, pausing at the door as he gazed out through one of the few windows the complex boasted. "Another question, another answer I need. If I'm truly from Heiwa, why is that so? Why doesn't it burn my flesh in the way that it burns theirs?"

As he mulled over this disturbing observation, he felt the pain impulses creep once more over his senses and he frowned, rubbing his temples as he struggled to push it back out of his mind. This time, however, it was not going to take no for an answer, and as he stumbled back in the direction of his lab he felt the familiar flashes of burning pain dart through his arms and legs, causing his movements to become clumsy and heavy. Tiredness and alarm mingled through him, as he put his hands to the door, fumbling with the electronic lock as he sought only to get away from the flickering light that now seemed to only make matters worse. The world twisted and glowed, burning deep into him and he staggered into the lab, dropping to his knees as the relentless pulses gained more and more ground.

"Zakari?"

Komei's voice was far away, and even as she took his hand in hers, Zakari was barely aware of her presence. A strange energy surged and blossomed within him, glittering in front of his eyes and teasing at the tips of his fingers, causing them to tingle and prickle at random intervals. Komei's voice became little more than a faint blur of sounds as he lost the fight to control his body, allowing the energy to flare through him again and again until it reached such a pitch Zakari was sure he was going to explode.

At the last minute, just as he became sure he could not bear it any longer, a tiny sense of realisation darted through him and he threw back his hands with a yell, pushing Komei heavily away from him as a bright white light engulfed his body, threatening to dazzle the whole chamber. He

was aware of her scream, somewhere in the background, and the sound of glass shattering all around him.

For a moment, nothing moved, and then, almost as quickly as it had come, the impulse began to fade. As Zakari opened his eyes, dizzy colours danced before them as he struggled to bring the fragments of his mind back into some sense of order. Weakly he pulled himself into a sitting position, gazing around his laboratory without truly understanding what he was seeing.

The room was charred from ceiling to roof, and in the blackness, the monitors of each computer console had exploded one by one, leaving fragments of glass scattered across the floor. The usual whirring sounds the machines made was nowhere to be heard, and in the eerie silence that followed, Zakari summoned all his strength, pulling himself resolutely to his feet. Even as the emergency alarms began to ring out across the complex, the shards of an idea began to penetrate his befuddled senses and he scanned the room anxiously, his fear growing as he remembered that he had not been alone.

“Komei?” He whispered, almost afraid to speak her name in the dark gloom. There was no response, and Zakari’s fear grew as he became more and more aware of the extent of the damage. At first, he was afraid she had simply been swallowed up in the explosion, but then he caught sight of a flash of blond hair in amongst the debris and he hurried forwards, tiredness forgotten as he tossed back the equipment that had almost buried his colleague alive.

She lay still and unresponsive, and as he put his finger to her cheek, she did not open her eyes. Tears welled up within him as he sank down at her side, lifting her gently up into his arms as he struggled to find any spark of life in his bright, vivacious companion.

“Komei.” He whispered. “What have I done? What... what in hell’s name **am** I?”

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

The mountains were beautiful in Springtime.

As the sun rose gently over the landscape, touching the hills and valleys with its delicate golden beams, a lone figure flitted idly across the sky, a dreamy look in her bright amber eyes as she absorbed her surroundings fully. For a moment she just hovered above the roofs of the few houses that littered the landscape, oblivious to the fact that on the ground below, two children playing had seen her and were pointing excitedly to where the ‘angel-woman’ was watching over them. As she drifted towards the old Shinto shrine that was still the property of the Masaki family generations on, she touched gracefully down on the tiled roof, settling herself in a comfortable position against the end stone as she relaxed back on her hands, staring up at the gleaming blue sky.

“Another bright, sunny day.” She whispered contentedly, as from somewhere to her right there was a scrabble of claws on tiles and a small, furry bundle tumbled into her lap. “You know something, Ryo Ohki — sometimes I can’t imagine a world more beautiful than this one... anywhere in the universe.”

The small chocolate-coloured creature mewed her agreement, flicking her long feathery ears as if to emphasise her point. The woman smiled, reaching down absently to scratch her companion under the chin.

“I’m not sure how we came to be this lucky, but I don’t think I’m going to question it.” She added. “Since we came back from Jurai, I’ve had a lot to think about. Ayeka’s confession, and the way she’s felt about things since Tenchi and I became a couple. The way we trust in one another, he and I... the fact that it didn’t matter to me then, what she said. I really do believe now that we’re meant to be together. How can it be any other way? We’ve been through far too much!”

Ryo Ohki eyed her mistress mournfully, and Ryoko bit her lip, nodding her head.

“I know. I’ve really had it better than you.” She said regretfully. “I’m sorry about Ken Ohki, Ryo Ohki. I know you feel about him the same way as I do about Tenchi. I’ve kind of kept you apart, in a way,

by making all the decisions. But I'd miss you, if you went away... and I think you'd miss me, wouldn't you? So I guess this is just how it's going to be."

Ryo Ohki set her head down on her paws, and Ryoko felt a flicker of acceptance dart across her senses. She grinned.

"I knew I meant more to you than that beige ball of fluff, anyway." She said off-handedly. "You and I are a team, after all. Although I do still think it's odd — almost contrived — how you were built by Washu and in a sense, so was I."

Ryo Ohki yowled indignantly at Ryoko's choice of words, and Ryoko looked sheepish.

"Sorry. You were *created* by Washu." She corrected herself. "I forgot that you don't like that any more than I do. You're my sister."

Ryo Ohki flicked her ears again, and Ryoko nodded.

"Yes, I know." She agreed, letting out a heavy sigh. "Washu has so many secrets, it's hard to be sure what is and isn't the truth sometimes. You know? I'm not sure what she does and what she doesn't know. Sometimes I feel like she is my mother — or that, in some fleeting way, she might have been, once. When we battled Yugi, it was almost like she was coming to my defence, as a true parent might protect her child. But the next minute she was scolding me on my imbalanced magic and talking about training. For a moment, I guess I thought she might have seen me as more than one of her experiments. But then, at other times, I've been so completely sure all her interest in me is just monitoring how much progress her little project has made. Like everything I do — all my forays into life and love — are just footnotes in her analysis. Do you feel that way, too?"

Ryo Ohki looked thoughtful for a moment, then she rubbed up against her mistress's arm with a soft purr, and Ryoko laughed.

"All right. I guess it isn't important." She acknowledged. "I don't need validation from her, anyway. I have my Tenchi and I have you to look out for me. So I'm all set, really."

"Ryoko!"

As if bidden by her thoughts, the sound of her fiance's voice startled the former pirate to alertness and she sat upright, a hand automatically coming out to catch Ryo Ohki as the cabbit tumbled awkwardly out of her lap. Ryo Ohki scrambled up Ryoko's arm, settling herself more securely on Ryoko's shoulder and sending the newcomer a self-righteous glare.

“You made Ryo Ohki jump.” Ryoko eyed the young man playfully. “Do you want to come up and play with us, Tenchi-kun? Or has Ojii-san sent you on some shrine-cleaning errand?”

“Actually, I came to tell you that breakfast is ready. Yume’s had an early start this morning and it all smells delicious.” Tenchi told her, sending her a grin. “Sorry about the surprise, Ryo Ohki. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Breakfast?” Ryoko looked interested. “All right. I guess we’re coming down, then. Hang on tight, Ryo Ohki.”

She flickered her form out from the top of the roof, re-materialising on the ground not far from her companion and placing her hands on his shoulders, leaning forward to give him a playful kiss. “I haven’t seen you since last night, either. What has had you so busy, my Tenchi? You don’t usually keep me out of your room late at night.”

“Don’t say things like that — people will get the wrong impression about what we do.” Tenchi looked embarrassed, and Ryoko laughed.

“Well, that’s their problem.” She said unrepentantly. “Why are you really keeping me out of your room, Tenchi-kun? Don’t you like having me there?”

“No, it’s not that.” Tenchi shook his head, and she linked her arm in his as they turned back towards the house. “It’s more that I’ve got important exams coming up in the next week or so. I want to pass, so I’ve been going over things again and again. I’ve let myself get too distracted with saving the world, and I’ve fallen a little behind. That’s all. It’s just boring study... nothing more.”

“Oh, I see.” Ryoko pouted. “As if you don’t do enough of that in Osaka. And Tenchi, it’s your birthday next weekend, too. Are we still going to hang out with Ikeda and Sakura in the city? Or are you going to cancel that in your pre-exam panic?”

“No, I think we’re still going ahead with that.” Tenchi looked rueful. “As far as I know. Exams are a stressful time for everyone, you know — we will probably need the break.”

“Well, that’s good at least.” Ryoko gazed thoughtfully up at the sky. “I wouldn’t know about exams. I’ve never really taken any.”

“Didn’t you ever have school, when you were a kid on Jurai?”

“I had a tutor, for a while. Several, actually.” Ryoko pondered. “Put most of them in therapy. It was all so boring and pointless.”

“I guess I can see that.” Tenchi looked amused. “You’ve always

been a much more practical person, than a theoretical one. I can't picture you with books, pen and paper."

"Well, me either." Ryoko eyed him coquettishly. "Being practical is more fun, anyway. I'm good with my hands, you know."

"Yes, I know." Tenchi laughed. "But right now, we're keeping Yume and Washu waiting."

"Yume and Washu? What about Otousan?" Ryoko looked startled. "He can't have left for work already?"

"He has." Tenchi grimaced. "If you want to talk to someone about too much work, he's the one to target. I swear he's going to make himself ill if he carries on working all days, all weeks, all weather. But then, he's always been like that, pretty much."

"You won't be like that, Tenchi, will you? When you graduate?" Ryoko asked plaintively. "I don't want to be the wife of some guy who's never there."

"I don't think I'd like it, either." Tenchi said thoughtfully. "But really, I don't know what the future holds yet."

"That's part of the fun." Ryoko said philosophically. "So tell me, Tenchi, when we're in Osaka, what are we doing after we go out to celebrate? Are you going to let me give you a very special birthday present... or what?"

"My birthday isn't actually till the Monday after, you know." Tenchi pointed out. "That's nine whole days away."

Ryoko shrugged.

"So? It can be an early surprise." She said playfully. "Tenchi, this is the first birthday we've really had together since we became a couple. It's special. The last time you had a birthday, I was still at the pleasure of the Galaxy Police, locked up in that poky, nasty little cell. And you sure hadn't told me that you'd finally seen sense and fallen in love with me. You really took way too long about that — and this is the first chance we've had to celebrate your birthday as a proper couple. An *engaged* couple, no less. Don't you think it would be nice? We could find a cute hotel, maybe make some reservations... if you want, Ryo Ohki can fly us to anywhere in the universe. You choose. But..."

"Woah there." Tenchi laughed, putting up his hands. "Shouldn't you ask Ryo Ohki about this, first?"

"I doubt she'd mind." Ryoko sent her furry companion a quizzical look, and Ryo Ohki nuzzled up against Ryoko's ear with a purr.

“There, you see? She likes helping.”

“You know, Ryoko, you’re right that we’ve not spent my birthday together as a couple.” Tenchi looked thoughtful. “But we’ve also never celebrated your birthday at all. Even when you were here, on Earth, with Ayeka and all the others. You never told me when it was.”

“A lady never reveals her true age, Tenchi-kun.”

“And you don’t keep secrets from someone you’re going to marry.” Tenchi reminded her. “You were the one who said we didn’t have any secrets between us now. Besides, I know, roughly, how old you are. In Earth years — in the way things work out, you were born before Washu was imprisoned. So that makes you around seven Earth centuries... give or take. Doesn’t it?”

“I prefer to count it in Juraian years.” Ryoko objected, a rueful smile touching her lips. “Since Earth now rotates on a Juraian time axis, I think that’s only fair. In which case, Tenchi-kun, I’m not that old at all. Not really.”

“I don’t quite know how Jurai years figure out.” Tenchi admitted. “Care to clue me in?”

Ryoko frowned.

“Honestly? I’m not really sure.” She admitted. “I don’t know exactly how old I am, or when I was born. I think I’m about the same age as Ayeka is — but I can’t be entirely sure.”

“You really don’t know?” Tenchi was startled. “Washu has never told you?”

“We don’t have meaningful mother and daughter chats, reminiscing about my childhood.” Ryoko shook her head. “I know roughly when I was born — like you, I figure it was around the time Washu was exiled, or a bit before it. It must have been, considering everything that happened. But other than that, no. I don’t really know.”

“Well, then we should really find out.” Tenchi grinned at her, as they reached the house, Ryo Ohki bounding down off Ryoko’s shoulder with a yowl of anticipation as her sensitive nose picked up the enticing scent of carrot soup. “We should ask Washu about it. Then we’d have two birthdays to celebrate. Not just the one.”

“I suppose.” Ryoko nodded, pushing open the front door and leading the way through to where Yume, the household’s droid-cum-housekeeper was putting the finishing preparations to the morning meal. She turned as they entered, casting both a warm smile.

“You made perfect time.” She observed. “We’re all ready to eat.”

“Ryoko always knows when there’s food available.” The room’s final occupant put in dryly, and Ryoko turned to grimace in her mother’s direction, a gesture that was repeated by the woman herself. “Yume, you’ve excelled yourself this morning. Everything looks delicious... and after a hard night working in the lab, I’m famished.”

“Do you actually sleep, Washu?” Ryoko asked, settling herself down at the table and scooping up her chopsticks as she helped herself to fish. “I know you like spending time in your own little world, but honestly, you’re getting more and more reclusive as time goes on.”

“Are you worrying about me, Ryoko-chan?” Washu asked interestedly, and Ryoko snorted, shaking her head.

“No. It’s just too weird, having a mother who spends all her time in the store cupboard.” She said frankly. Tenchi laughed.

“There’s not much about this house that isn’t strange.” He reflected. “I think it’s part of the charm.”

“Precisely. Who’d want to go with the flow when you can swim upstream and get there quicker?” Washu said carelessly.

“It all seems a lot of nonsense. It doesn’t really matter what numbers belong in what sequence.” Ryoko shrugged. “It’s such a waste of time, when there’s so much going on outside.”

“You live your life, musume-chan, and I’ll live mine.”

“Yeah, but you’re confusing life with data input.” Ryoko pointed her chopsticks in Washu’s direction. “And it’s getting worse. Since we got back from Jurai the last time, you’ve spent way too long in your lab, obsessing about these stupid Kii magic powers you seem to think are suddenly important. All you do is quantify them and study them and do whatever else you do that makes your computers whirr, bleep and flash lights in random orders. This is the first time you’ve had breakfast with us in almost a week.”

“You’d better be careful. You almost do sound concerned.” Washu seemed amused. “I’m quite all right, I assure you.”

“Washu, can we ask you something, whilst you’re here?” Tenchi broke in at that point, before his fiancée could take the matter any further. The scientist nodded, turning sharp green eyes on him as she did so.

“Of course, Tenchi. You know that.” She agreed. “What’s bothering you? Something I can help you with?”

“Maybe.” Tenchi nodded. “Ryoko and I were talking about my birthday coming up, and I realised we’d never celebrated *her* birthday, either. But Ryoko doesn’t seem to know when she was born... not even what year, exactly. I hoped you could clear that up.”

Washu was silent for a moment, and Ryoko frowned.

“Don’t tell me you’re so old you’re going senile and you can’t remember?” She demanded. Washu eyed her daughter for a moment, then she offered her a careless smile.

“Truth to tell, I don’t remember a lot of things.” She agreed cheerfully. “And I did a lot of experiments around the time Ryoko was born. So I’m not sure I do know, not exactly. I guess it didn’t really matter all that much. She was a project, after all — but I destroyed all of the paperwork and the digital data relating to her when I gave her to Kichi. So I suppose I just forgot about it. Ryoko wasn’t ever going to be a part of my life, so it didn’t seem important to remember anything like that. My memory is only so big, after all — and I’ve got a lot of things to slot into it.”

“You don’t know when your only daughter was born?” Tenchi looked startled, and Washu shrugged.

“As I said, she was never going to be my daughter. She was a weapon, designed to defeat Kagato. It didn’t matter when she was born, or where, or any of that. Kichi would have invented a new past for her, anyway. The only thing she was going to keep was her code-name — Ryoko. That was what we agreed. I severed all connection with the project. It wasn’t important.”

“I guess that figures.” Ryoko said flatly. “Experiments again.”

“That’s me.” Washu agreed. “Sorry not to be of more help.”

“I don’t know when I was born, either.” Yume offered at that point, settling herself down beside them and reaching across to fondle Ryo Ohki’s ears as the cabbit stalked the slices of carrot that the droid had prepared for the morning meal. “I never really thought about it... is it really that important, to have a birthday?”

“I guess not.” Tenchi bit his lip. “I mean, you don’t have to celebrate one, or anything. All it does is mark that you’ve got a year older. But it’s nice, to spend it with friends and family. And you know, be thankful for all those things, too. That’s all.”

“I see.” Yume looked thoughtful. “It sounds kind of nice.”

“Yes. It is.”

“Well, I suppose that the only birthday we’ll be celebrating for a while will be yours, Tenchi-kun.” Ryoko stretched, dropping her chopsticks into her rice bowl with a clatter. “Since my mother’s lost too many braincells to care or remember about mine, and I guess she’s not going to tell us when hers is — if she can even recall that far back into the dark ages. We’ll just have to make the most of yours.”

“Are you all right?” Tenchi eyed her in consternation, and Ryoko sent him a playful smile, quelling firmly the wave of hurt that had risen up inside her at Washu’s careless words.

“I’ve lived this long without a birthday and it’s not like it matters much to me.” She said flippantly. “I told you, a woman’s age is a sacred secret. If you don’t know when I was born, you’ll never know how old I am. Which suits me.”

“Well, I suppose... if you’re sure.”

“Really, Tenchi. It isn’t a big deal.” Ryoko shrugged. “It might be on the Earth, but I’m not from the Earth. So it’s okay.”

She got to her feet.

“I think I’m going to go enjoy the sunshine for a while.” She added. “It’s a beautiful day, and since I’m awake, I might as well.”

Before anyone could stop her, she blurred out of the room, re-materialising beneath RyuOh’s tree and sinking back against the trunk with a sigh.

“Well, doesn’t that just figure.” She muttered. “Washu, my mother — the woman who can remember pi to six million digits, but who can’t be bothered to keep track of something as simple as my birthday. I guess I shouldn’t let it get to me. Washu will be Washu, after all — and it really isn’t important that I know. It would just have been nice to know she cared enough to remember. That’s all. But I guess I’m just being soft and stupid about it, anyway. We’ll celebrate Tenchi’s birthday — his is the one that really matters, after all. And mine, well, it isn’t important. After all, it’s just a day you were born. Nothing more.”

So, this was the place.

Zakari walked slowly through the dusty, abandoned streets of the city, pausing for a moment to take in his surroundings. He stifled a shiver as a brisk wind whipped and whirled around him, sending scraps of torn paper and old food wrappings rustling across the road.

As a torn sheet from a newspaper whipped around his ankles, he bent to pick it up, grimacing as he read the date across the top. It had been some time since anyone had been in this part of town, that was evident. In fact, he mused, it almost looked like a ghost town — one of the settlements ravaged by disease and decline during Heiwa's impoverished years under siege from more powerful enemies.

"I guess they never had the will to rebuild this place. Which is probably fitting, considering the monstrosity it conceals." He muttered, his strange eyes darkening as he considered all he had discovered. "Dr Clay... that name indelibly imprinted on the history of this planet, and yet I almost walked right past it so many times. The laboratory, concealed deep within the ruins of an ancient castle. Clever, but then I wouldn't expect any less from a scientific genius."

He smiled bitterly, reaching in his pocket for the small black box and pressing a couple of buttons on the surface. A screen glittered and spread out before him, and he focused on the blue and white of the digital map, taking careful note of where he was. A yellow dot flashed at the furthestmost point of the street, and he nodded in satisfaction, dispersing his map and sliding the device back into his pocket. It would come in useful again, he was sure of that. And thanks to the intensity of his training, he knew how to use it.

"But will there be anything left here for me to find?" He wondered aloud, as he finally stood before his destination, gazing up at the ruins of the old feudal castle, crumbling and rotting at the foundations. Brushing his hand over the remaining stone columns, the flagstones shimmered and parted, revealing a staircase leading down towards the planet's core, and slowly he descended, flickering light from his fingers as he went deeper and deeper into the darkness. The further he travelled, the more narrow and claustrophobic the tunnel became, and he bit his lip, forcing the thoughts out of his mind. Memories came to him unbidden, and for a moment he faltered, leaning up against the cold wall as he sought to regain his composure.

"The dreams have been so much more potent since that moment at the research institute." He murmured, closing his eyes as he carefully rearranged his thoughts back into some semblance of order. "Hints and whispers have become full blown images, and now I'm here, I know I'm right. I know that at long last I'm within inches of discovering the things I just don't know... but what hides behind these doors? What kind of answers am I going to find?"

He held up his hands in front of his face, eying the flickers of light with wary dislike.

“What kind of man can do such things as this?” He murmured. “Where did it come from? Why do I conceal such horrible, destructive strength? What *am* I?”

At this, a new image came to his mind and he screwed his eyes shut, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“No!” He exclaimed. “I’m not going to think of it. I’m not going to think of...”

He faltered, opening his eyes as he clenched and unclenched his fists, fighting his tears.

“Of Komei.” He whispered. “My Komei. I’m not going to... I can’t... I can’t see her that way. I have to find out what I am, and then I have to make sure I can never hurt anyone, ever again. For Komei’s sake... I must never go back. Not ever.”

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he calmed his frazzled emotions.

He had not seen her, he recalled bitterly, as he continued on his pathway downwards. Since the explosion at the lab, she had been in a deep, trauma-induced coma, suffering many physical and mental injuries, and even though it was cowardly, he had not been able to bring himself to see the result of his loss of control. Even now, the image of her lying motionless on the lab floor haunted him each night, and many had been the morning when he’d awoken in a cold sweat.

“She might yet die.” He muttered. “Nobody knows that I was the one who caused that blast, or that that’s the reason why I left. But it hardly matters, if Komei doesn’t wake up. And even if she does — how can I be around her? Knowing that this dark force within me grows stronger by the day — how can I even think of going near her again? I’m a monster — a demon in human flesh. And I won’t see her hurt again. I’ve done enough already!”

At that moment, he reached the end of the winding stairway and he frowned, hesitating for a moment and then placing his hands gently against the steel panels that blocked his path. A buzz of energy flooded through him, and with a loud clatter, the doors flew backwards off their hinges, creating a huge cloud of dust as he did so.

He drew a deep breath to steady himself, stepping cautiously into the chamber.

At first glance, the room seemed entirely unremarkable, but as he stood there, absorbing the cold emptiness of the abandoned laboratory, he felt a prickle run up his spine and despite himself he

tensed, half expecting some angry scientist to charge out of the shadows, wielding weapons to protect his place of work.

No such spectres appeared, however, and he took a few paces forwards, realising with a jolt the reason why the chamber felt so uncomfortable to his eyes.

“I’ve been here before.” He murmured, turning in a full circle so as to take in every inch. “Somehow, some way... this place is a part of my past. I was right. I was... I was right.”

In the furthest corner, the big computer system stood dormant, cloaked in a grey layer of neglect, and spiders of various sizes and species had begun to congregate around the edges of the walls. To one side, engraved steel panels marked containment chambers and as he looked at them, a sudden flash of irrational rage flooded through his body. He flung his arm in their direction, watching with little satisfaction as, one by one, the doors imploded inwards, causing the entire structure to collapse into a heap of steel rubble.

He drew a deep breath into his lungs, calming himself as memories threatened to overwhelm him once more.

“I mustn’t.” He muttered, closing his eyes as the energy surged within him. “I don’t know why I’m so on edge, but whatever happened to me, the answers must be in this place. I mustn’t blow it to pieces before I discover what those answers are. I need to know. It’s gone too far.”

With some difficulty he turned on his heel, approaching the mainframe computer and running his fingers carefully over the keypad. The machine did not seem damaged, he mused, and as he reached in his pocket for his black device, he placed it firmly against the machine’s main data drive, pressing buttons as the screen whirled and flickered into life.

He hesitated for a moment, then he slowly keyed a sequence of letters and numbers into the contraption.

“Tell me what I want to know, computer.” He said quietly. “Tell me who I really am, and whatever else you know.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

Well, so it was Friday already.

Ryoko stood thoughtfully on the banks of the lake, gazing pensively down through the rippling water below to where she could just about make out the faint shadow of spacecraft, hidden in the depths. Pursing her lips for a moment, she hovered above the glittering water, then, in a short, sharp movement she dived beneath the surface, forging down towards the place where the remains of her old ship lay.

The last Ryo Ohki had not rusted, nor had it decayed, but it had become a part of the lake bottom and as Ryoko ran her fingers over the jagged edges of the craft, a slight smile touched her lips. Even this ship, who had now lost all sense of life and been reincarnated into another had become part of life on Earth.

The shadow of Yukinojo loomed to her left and carefully she kicked her way through the pondweed, startling a few brave fish who had come out to inspect the cause of the ripples. Mihoshi's ship had suffered more from its time under water, she realised, as frames and hinges had begun to deteriorate. For a moment she just gazed at them pensively. Then she surged upwards, breaking through the surface to the air beyond and sending a glittering shower of droplets back down to the lake below.

"Ryoko, what are you doing?"

Tenchi's call from the bank made her glance down, offering him a rueful smile as she surveyed her soaked clothing.

"I felt like taking a swim." She responded. "Do you want to come join me, Tenchi-kun? The water is cold and crisp."

"In the lake? You have to be kidding." Tenchi held out his hands to her and gracefully she set down beside him, taking his hands in her grip. "You're drenched from head to foot — Ryoko, why were you swimming if you're still fully dressed?"

"It was a spur of the moment thing." Ryoko admitted. "It just seemed a good idea."

"But why? Ryoko-chan, you're shivering... come inside, or you're going to catch cold. It isn't summer yet, you know!"

“I’m not that c... cold.” Ryoko shook her head. “I’m fine, really.”

“And randomly plunging into the depths of the lake because...?” Tenchi raised an eyebrow, and Ryoko offered him a rueful smile.

“I went to see the old Ryo Ohki.” She owned. “Just to see if the ship was still there, beneath the water. And it was. Just like it was when Ryo Ohki regenerated herself. It’s just a shell, now. Nothing more than that. But it hasn’t decayed any further in all the time we’ve been here. Like someone stopped it in time. It hasn’t aged a bit.”

“And the point of all that was what, exactly?” Tenchi looked bewildered. “As you said, it’s just a shell now. Ryo Ohki is fine and healthy, right? There’s nothing wrong with her?”

“No, she’s fine.” Ryoko shook her head, shivering once more as a bitter wind whipped through her. “Brr. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it is cold out here.”

“You think so?” Tenchi eyed her thoughtfully. “Look, come inside. We can talk as we go — but I don’t want you getting a cold.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Huh?”

“Get a cold.” Ryoko shrugged. “I’ve never been ill in my life, unless you count the after-effects of battles with idiots like Kagato. I’ve taken physical injury, but I’ve never contracted a disease. It’s funny, isn’t it? Ryo Ohki is the same way. It’s been down there for ages, and yet it still looks the same. Like nothing can touch it somehow.”

“You’re making no sense to me.” Tenchi’s brows knitted together as he steered her gently into the house and up the stairs towards the bathroom. “And just because you haven’t had a cold before, it doesn’t mean there can’t be a first time.”

“I wonder.” Ryoko paused, eying him pensively. “I suppose I was thinking about what Washu said. About me being a project, and all that. I suppose it’s not really natural, is it, to sustain no natural damage or harm just by living an ordinary life? Ryo Ohki was an invention and designed not to weather or rust or do any of those things. I’m thinking that I might be the same way. A little unnatural, too.”

Comprehension flickered in Tenchi’s expression and he gripped her tightly by the hands, kissing her gently.

“You’re not unnatural and you’re not just an experiment.” He said softly. “Not even in Washu’s eyes. I was right about that, though,

wasn't I? This birthday thing does bother you more than she seems to think it does?"

"I don't know." Ryoko sighed, leaning up against him with little regard for her wet clothing. "At the end of the day, I was created in a lab unit. So I don't know what exactly Washu did when she tampered with my DNA. I wasn't born at random — it wasn't natural selection. She's said before that she worked on bringing as many of Kagato's magical attributes to the fore as she could, to make sure I'd have as good a chance as possible against him when we finally faced off. Perhaps she is right, after all. I mean, maybe projects and weapons just don't get birthdays and things like that."

"I should never have mentioned it to you." Tenchi looked guilty. "I didn't mean to make you think like this."

"You didn't. It was Washu who did that." Ryoko shook her head. "I don't know that I mind because having a birthday matters to me. I think it's more the fact she didn't remember when it was. That I was just another experiment, you know? There are times I think she might care about me, and times I really don't know. This is one of those latter times. Right now, I really haven't a clue — but I don't like thinking about myself as just another lab toy. The trouble is, it might well be the truth at the end of the day."

Tenchi hugged her tightly.

"You aren't an experiment to me." He said softly. "You know that. I love you and I'm going to marry you, whatever your origins and wherever you came from. It doesn't matter when you were born, or where, or how. I don't care about those things. I care about *you*, and that's the thing that counts. So don't worry about it, okay? That's the past, like Washu said. This is now. This is what counts."

Ryoko eyed him affectionately, offering him a slight smile.

"Perhaps you're right." She agreed. "And it helps to know you feel that way."

"But sometimes you'd like your mother to see you as more than an experiment too, huh?"

"No, sometimes I'd just like to think I *have* a mother." Ryoko grimaced. "That's all. Just from time to time. But maybe that's just not going to happen. Washu's hard to figure. Sometimes I think I have her measure, but then something happens and I really don't know her at all."

"I guess there's a lot of Washu to really get to know. She's lived a

lot longer than most other people.” Tenchi reflected. “But I’m sure she does care about you, Ryoko-chan. Even if she isn’t sure how to express that love to you directly.”

“Well, what does it matter anyway?” Ryoko sighed, glancing down at herself with a rueful smile. “I’m getting morose and pathetic, being hung up on something so stupid as a birthday. I’m going to go take a hot bath, change, and get over myself. I’m sorry, Tenchi. I didn’t mean to go all sissy on you.”

“You can do that any time you like.” Tenchi told her gently. “That’s what I’m here for, after all.”

“I can think of better uses for you.”

“And *that* sounds more like the fiancée I know and love.” Tenchi touched her cheek playfully. “Go have a bath — you’ll feel better. And don’t worry about Washu. Whyever you came to be, the important thing to me is that you are here. And even if there are things that are different about you because of it, they’re just things that make you *you*. You know that.”

“I suppose I do.” Ryoko said pensively. She eyed him for a moment, then kissed him, looping her arms around his shoulders. “Do you want to come take a bath with me, Tenchi-kun?”

“Tempting as that might be, there are other people home, and I do have studying to get down to.” Tenchi disentangled himself with a rueful laugh. “If we’re going to Osaka midweek, I won’t get much work done with Ikeda and Sakura around. So it has to be now — I don’t want to do badly. These exams are ones that matter, after all.”

“All right.” Ryoko sighed, nodding her head. “Then I’ll see you later. Don’t work too hard, huh?”

“I’ll try not to.” Tenchi assured her. “And you try not to think too hard, okay? Focus on the week ahead instead. If you can’t have your own birthday, after all, you know you can always share the fun of mine.”

“I know that.” Despite herself, a smile touched Ryoko’s lips. “And I appreciate it. Thank you, Tenchi-kun. Happy studying!”

Before he could reply, she flickered out of the hallway, re-materialising outside the bathroom door as she considered his words.

“I guess he’s right. I guess it doesn’t matter so much, and I know he loves me regardless of my history.” She mused, as she rummaged in the cupboards for a clean towel. “But even so, it’s yet another question

that I haven't got answers to. It would be nice if for once — just for once! — Washu would give a straight answer instead of beating around the bush in the way that she does. Nothing is ever simple with her, and it makes it hard to know what the truth is or isn't. But still, I suppose that's just the way things are, and I'm not going to fret over it. After all, I do have my Tenchi, and I am not going to let this overshadow his birthday. If my mother wants to be difficult, well, let her be difficult. I'm *not* going to let her get to me!"

Well, so now there truly was no going back.

Zakari stretched out on the floor of the small, delapidated apartment room, casting a grim glance around him as he registered the mess. On every surface were paper printouts from the computer system he had hacked in the abandoned Heiwa laboratory, and after several hours reading, he had begun to piece together all the bits and pieces that had led him to this point.

He clenched his fists, his eyes darkening as faint flickers of light danced around the edges of his form.

"Zakari Kure isn't real." He murmured. "Pandora's box is truly open now. I remember... I remember so much more than I did before. With every impulse of energy, I seem to unlock more and more clues to my past. And it's all here. Here, in Dr Clay's files... in his electronic journal. Everything. Everything about me. And who I truly am."

He shuffled back against the wall, scooping up the nearest pile and flipping through the pages as he searched for a particular section.

"Project Z-0001332536893." He read aloud. "Just a serial number. A creation. Someone's project... someone's toy."

The white magic flared across his finger tips once more, catching the edge of the flimsy sheet of paper, and Zakari watched detachedly as it flared into an eerie blue flame, dropping into ash onto the worn carpet beneath him. He sighed, shaking his head.

"Well, now I know." he decided heavily, getting to his feet and moving to the window. "I know why my memories have been so patchy, and why I never really knew where I came from. I have my answer... was I better off not knowing?"

For a moment he wavered, as if debating this with himself. Then an image of Komei's ash-dusted face flashed into his mind and he screwed up his eyes, clutching his head as he forced the image away.

"No. I needed to know." He whispered. "I'm a monster and I'm not

safe to be around. Clay's files — he discarded me. I was a failed project — he chose to rid himself of me because I was unstable, and now everything makes sense. My biology is breaking down, bit by bit, and I'm a danger to be near. Komei could already be dead because of me. I won't risk her — or any other innocent — ever again."

He rested his arms on the ledge of the window, ignoring the dessicated remains of insects amid the dust as he gazed sightlessly out across the landscape. He knew that they were still looking for him, at the Institute. That since the explosion, several news broadcasts had speculated on the whereabouts of the brilliant, enigmatic scientist who had apparently disappeared into dust the day his laboratory had imploded. But so far he had concealed himself from them all, and he knew that in a place such as this, few would look for him. Absently he reached up to touch his hair, which he had shorn short in a fit of rage only a few days earlier, and a cold smile touched his lips. His once neat and careful appearance was nowhere in evidence, and the wild pulses of energy that wracked through him at intervals had reached even as far as the tips of his hair, making it wild and unmanageable now no longer schooled into a long tail down his back. His scientist's garb had been discarded in favour of more functional travel clothes, and he still bore the reminders of events in his laboratory, three months earlier.

"Noone would even recognise me." He mused, glancing down at the fading scars that marked his arms. "Zakari Kure might as well be dead. That life is my past, and it was never real, anyway. The true me is here, locked away in these files. An experiment gone wrong — an attempt to capture divine magic. I'm a bomb waiting to explode, and all I have is time."

He sighed, returning his attention to the as-yet unexplored sections of the printout, bending to scoop up the end of the long sheet as he scanned his gaze across the densely printed characters. "The question is, what do I do now? Dr Clay is dead. I've done enough digging in the last few months to prove that beyond a doubt. He's long gone, and this place is abandoned. Whoever was pulling his strings when he decided to dabble in genetics, they don't seem overly interested in his work or in covering their tracks. Maybe they're also dead — or maybe they just think that noone would ever go to an abandoned castle looking for a lab. Whatever the truth is, I don't have anyone to confront and demand answers from. Just reams and reams of a digital journal and lab notes. It's not enough."

He frowned, his brow creasing as he forced his memory back.

“I remember Clay. I remember him, watching me with his cold, beady eyes.” He murmured. “But if he’s a dead end... there must be something else. Someone else.”

He glanced back at the paper before him, leaning up against the wall as he skimmed through the rest of the document.

“Project Z’s progress continues to falter.” He read aloud, bitterness in his tones. *“Even with Zero’s constant monitoring and vigilance, the cells continue to break down at an alarming rate. Have returned to Washu’s original file, but have found nothing to explain such a reaction. My conclusion is that Z’s structure has become unstable, most likely on account of the enhanced rapidity of his growth process. Tests will continue. The subject shows no sign of emotional or physical awareness to pain or other stimuli. Rigorous testing has proven that his skin is resilient to most known corrosives and other substances, however the ongoing need for repair suggests that this project may yet outlive it’s usefulness.”*

He sighed, screwing the sheet up in his fist and tossing the crumpled pages across the room.

“Zero.” He murmured, as flickers of memory began to tease at his senses. “Clay’s robot. I remember her, too. She poked and prodded and tormented me on his every order. And as for showing no awareness, well, I might be a genetic creation, but I soon learnt that the less I reacted, the quicker the pain stopped. You call yourself a scientist, Clay? Perhaps I’m not the only monster.”

He sighed, shaking his head.

“But if Clay is dead, Zero is probably also shut down and I wouldn’t take much pleasure avenging myself on a robot.” He acknowledged to himself. “What about this other name? Washu? Why do I know that name? Where could I have heard it before?”

He rummaged through the masses of paper, extracting his black device from where it had been buried by the prints, and flicking his fingers over the buttons.

“Washu.” He murmured. “What can you tell me on Washu?”

The box whirred and flickered, then glowed with a bright blue light as a translucent screen grew and spread out before him, an image gradually becoming more and more distinct with every passing moment.

“Professor Washu Hakubi.” Zakari’s eyes opened wide with surprise and alarm. *“That’s how I know the name! She’s a genius — her work is legendary across the universe. Mad, perhaps, but a genius nonetheless.*

Is Clay saying that this woman was involved somehow in my development? Was it her, pulling Clay's strings? Were they working together?"

He flicked off the box, retrieving the crumpled sheet of paper and smoothing it out as he re-read the passage to himself.

"Have returned to Washu's original file." He murmured. "Well, it sure looks that way. But *what* original file? This is something I haven't come across before! Perhaps I'm not alone. Perhaps this was a much bigger experiment... which means there could be others out there. Others like me who could be a heartbeat away from destroying buildings and lives just because someone thought it would be fun to play do it yourself with DNA."

His eyes narrowed, as inwardly he made up his mind.

"If I am as unstable as Clay suggests, I don't have a lot of time." He mused. "But I'm going to make sure none of it goes to waste. I'm going to find out what this 'file' of Washu Hakubi's was, and then I'm going to track her down and destroy her. Clay might be dead, but I know Professor Hakubi is based on some remote rock in the depths of space. The Earth... that's what I last heard. So I'll track her down, and then I'll make sure that she doesn't get the chance to inflict this kind of pain on anyone else!"

As if sparked by his resolve, the energy flared once more through his body, illuminating him from head to foot as it sent prickles of electricity through every sense. He swallowed hard, taking a shaky breath of air as he fought to bring it back under control, and at length he succeeded, exhaustion washing over him as he sank back down onto the floor.

"I must plan carefully." He whispered. "I can't risk going into a heavily populated place to confront her, not in this state. I'll have to find another way. So first things first. I need to find Washu's 'file'. Somewhere in all this junk must be the solution I'm looking for. Now I just have to dig it out."

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

Two am.

Ryoko sat up in bed, stretching and stifling a yawn as she glanced across the small bedroom towards the luminous dial of the clock. Moonlight glittered in through the window, making a mottled pattern on the carpet, and for a moment the former pirate just watched the light dance beneath the fluttering curtains. Then she frowned, casting a regretful glance down at her pillows.

"I hate sleeping on my own." She muttered. "Beds don't do it for me, and nor does sleeping inside. Not if I'm relegated to my own quarters. This sucks... Tenchi is locked up in his room studying, and I'm stuck here."

A sleepy mew at her right hand made her glance down, meeting the inquisitive golden eyes of her spaceship, and despite herself, she smiled.

"Morning, Ryo Ohki." She said lightly. "I guess I woke you up, huh? Sorry. I didn't mean to be so restless."

Ryo Ohki eyed her thoughtfully for a moment, then rubbed up against her mistress's arm with a purr, and Ryoko smiled, scooping her companion up in her hands.

"At least I'm not completely alone." She acknowledged. "But I can't sleep this way, so what do you say we go pay a surprise visit to the student, huh? If he's not studying, he won't object to me crashing his room. And if he is, well, it's about time he stopped. It's late, and all work and no play makes Tenchi a dull boy."

Ryo Ohki mewed doubtfully, and Ryoko snorted.

"Oh, come on." She said impatiently. "If you don't try, you never know. Are you going to come with me? Or shall I go alone?"

Ryo Ohki whimpered, and Ryoko felt the flicker of disapproval flit across her senses. However, the small, furry cabbit hopped up onto the pirate's shoulder, settling herself down with a sigh of resignation. Ryoko grimaced at her.

"Stop it." She ordered. "And pipe down. We're going. Now."

She closed her eyes, focusing her energy on Tenchi's room as the world blurred and twisted around her. An exclamation told her that she had reached her destination, and she opened her eyes, sending her startled fiancé a playful smile.

"You're still up." She observed, settling herself down on his bedcovers and taking in the pile of books that stood beside Tenchi's desk. "You're working far too hard, you know. Don't you get to take a break?"

"Ryoko, what are you doing in here?" Tenchi closed his book, eying her with some confusion. "It's gone two o' clock. Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Why aren't you?"

"I have exams coming up. You don't have that excuse."

"Well, I was lonely." Ryoko pouted. "I couldn't sleep. So I came to rescue you from yourself, instead. If you study constantly, Tenchi, you'll wind up as demented as Washu. Take a moment to relax, will you? You're smart enough already to ace those tests of yours."

"Ryoko." Tenchi shook his head slowly, setting his work aside and getting to his feet. "I know that this might not seem like a big deal to you. But it matters to me, whether I do well or not."

"I know that." Ryoko nodded. "But you look tired, Tenchi-kun. And you can't tell me you're not glad of a distraction."

"Well, maybe." Tenchi relented, coming to sit beside her on the bed. "Although we are in the mountains, so I don't know what kind of distraction you're thinking of."

"Contrary to popular belief, Tenchi, I'm not completely obsessed with seducing you." Ryoko pouted, though mischief flickered in her golden eyes. "Sometimes I just like your company."

"I see." Tenchi looked amused. "And so you and Ryo Ohki came down here just to chat?"

"Do you think I'd have brought Ryo Ohki, if I was planning anything else?" Ryoko demanded. She glanced down at herself, indicating the old loose shirt that she was wearing. "And don't you think I'd have come dressed for the occasion? Seriously, Tenchi, I've just missed you of late, that's all. You and I have barely spoken since you refused to come swimming with me, because you've been shut away with your books. That was almost two days ago now. I want some Tenchi time too — is that too much to ask?"

"I guess not." Tenchi shook his head, slipping his arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Ryoko. I didn't mean to neglect you."

"Well, I suppose you're forgiven." Ryoko leant up against him, casting him a thoughtful look. "Can I stop here, then? Can I sleep with you tonight? My room is cold and lonely."

"I guess it won't hurt." Tenchi agreed hesitantly. "So long as you do mean, well, sleep."

"I already said I did!"

"All right." Tenchi nodded. "I'm sorry."

"So you should be." Ryoko tapped him playfully on the arm. "I'll save the other thing for our trip to Osaka, anyway. Being that it's your birthday, I am going to make it a week to remember. Just keep that in mind, all right?"

"And you think that telling me that will help me sleep?" Tenchi bantered. Ryoko grinned unrepentantly, leaning across to kiss him.

"You shouldn't be such a stick in the mud." She murmured. "Trust in me, Tenchi. I'm going to make your birthday memorable. I promise."

"Of that I have no doubt." Tenchi said dryly. "All right. Let me put my books away, and we'll get some rest. Just don't tell Grandpa I let you camp out in my room tonight, all right?"

"Fine." Ryoko shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not in the business of sharing my social life with outsiders, anyhow."

She looped her arms around his neck, kissing him again.

"Besides, when we're married, things will be different." She added teasingly. "So we may as well begin in the right direction."

"Do you children have to make such a noise?"

At that moment the door of the bedroom slid back and Ryoko started, wheeling to face the intruder with an indignant glare.

"Washu! What do you want!" She demanded angrily. "Tenchi and I were having a private conversation, and you should learn how to knock!"

"Your private conversation can be heard from down the hallway." Washu said impassively, glancing from one to the other. "It's gone two o' clock — don't you people sleep?"

"We were about to do just that, Washu." Tenchi said sheepishly.

“I’ve been studying. Ryoko just came to keep me company.”

“Oh, I’m sure of that.” Washu looked amused. “However, you might want to keep it down. People on this landing are trying to sleep.”

“You sleep in your lab. Why do you care?” Ryoko shot back. “Or are you spying on us?”

“Spying? No. Just washing my hair.” Washu indicated the towel that was wrapped around her thick red waves. “I’m about to call it a night myself. I heard voices, and saw a light under the door — so I thought I’d let you know that the whole house can probably hear your conversation.”

“The whole house shouldn’t be listening.” Ryoko said flatly. “Go away, Washu.”

“I’m going.” Washu said flippantly. “Just keep it in mind, all right? You kids have been bad enough under this roof already. Don’t let me have to play chaperone, will you?”

“We were really just going to sleep, Washu.” Tenchi began, but Ryoko was on her feet at this, cutting indignantly across her fiancé’s explanation as she did so.

“What business is it of yours what we do or don’t do?” She demanded. “Tenchi and I are adults and we’re going to be married. You have no right to tell us what we can or we can’t do, so butt out of it already, will you? Your opinion really doesn’t matter. If Tenchi and I want to ‘be bad’ as you put it, well, that’s up to us. Get that into your head, will you?”

“Is that any way to speak to your mother, Ryoko-chan?” Washu’s expression feigned hurt, and Ryoko’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re not my mother. I’m your project, or did you forget that?” She demanded bitterly. “The one you can’t remember any specific details about. Mother? Don’t make me laugh.”

Washu shook her head slowly, tut-tutting under her breath.

“Your manners.” She said resignedly.

“Washu, Ryoko, please... let’s leave it. At least till the morning.” Tenchi begged, but Ryoko shook her head, putting her hands on her hips as she glared coldly in the scientist’s direction.

“No.” She said frankly. “She can’t have it both ways. I don’t care if I’m an experiment to her, or if I’m her child. But I can’t be both things. So either you stop butting into Tenchi and my life like you care

what happens, Washu, or you start treating me like a person, instead of something you're studying. All right?"

Washu sighed heavily.

"Is this about your birthday again, Ryoko-chan?" She asked quietly. "You really do hold onto things, don't you?"

"It doesn't matter to me when my birthday is. It was Tenchi who wanted to know, not me." Ryoko snapped back, light dancing across her finger-tips as she spoke. "And I don't care if you remember or if you don't. But you said yourself I was never going to be your daughter... I was going to be your weapon. And Kichi was going to raise me. So you can take your nose out of my affairs, if you don't mind. You resigned all maternal rights you had over me when you made that decision and sent me off to be trained to do your dirty work for you."

"Ryoko." Tenchi put a gentle hand on her arm, but she shook him off.

"No, Tenchi. We get this constantly, and I've had enough." She said quietly. "Washu, you can't have it both ways. Maybe you're just nosy, or perhaps you hope that you can study my romantic development as another part of your project — who really knows? It's all science with you. But I don't see it that way, and I'm telling you now. Get out of my business."

"You really are so rude, musume-chan." Washu seemed unperturbed by Ryoko's temper, which only served to incense the pirate further.

"Are you listening to a word I'm saying?" She demanded. Washu shrugged.

"It's all something of a blur." She said flippantly. "You're so incoherent when you're angry, and you don't make a whole lot of sense."

"Washu!" Ryoko exclaimed, light flaring from her hands, and Tenchi grabbed his fiancée by the wrists.

"No fighting!" He said firmly. "Not in my bedroom, not when people are trying to sleep. You're both tired — this isn't important and it can wait till the morning. Please, let's just go to bed!"

"Aren't you sick of her spying on us, too?" Ryoko demanded. "Don't you wish she'd poke her beak elsewhere?"

"I'm just showing my concern for the state of your relationship."

Washu said levelly, leaning up against the doorframe. "After all, your emotions are undeniably unstable at the best of times, Ryoko-chan. This whole outburst just shows that. Consider my involvement Tenchi's damage limitation. Someone has to make sure you don't explode on him."

"Or are you just jealous?" Ryoko snapped back. "You don't have anyone in your life who wants you, so you bother me and mine! You spend your life in a lab, hiding from the universe outside and then you pretend you can lecture me about the real world and my choices. Well, I've news for you. Get a life of your own before you start meddling in mine, *mother*! Find a man of your own and leave me and mine alone."

For a moment there was dead silence, and a mixture of emotions flitted across Washu's gaze. Then she regained her composure, her green eyes clouding as she surveyed her companion thoughtfully.

"When you grow up, you'll understand when to be grateful for the things you have." She said quietly, and despite herself, Ryoko was unnerved by the genuine emotion in her mother's tones. "In the meantime, you two keep it down. This is a respectable house, not a space brothel. I know you're selfish by nature, Ryoko, but at least try and have some consideration for the other people who live here."

With that she flickered and blurred out of view, the door snapping shut in the backdraft of her magic.

"Ryoko..." Tenchi broke the silence, and Ryoko glared at him, a challenge in her eyes.

"Are you going to take her side?" She demanded. Tenchi shook his head.

"I don't do that." He said softly. "But you needn't have said all those things. I think you really hurt her feelings."

"And she's never hurt mine, talking about me as someone's glorified science project?" Ryoko defended herself. "She had it coming to her."

"I don't know." Tenchi looked troubled. "Sasami said to me that she thought Washu lost someone... that she had a man, once, but he died. I think you hit a nerve, when you said what you did. It was a step too far."

"Washu?" Ryoko snorted. "She probably built him in her lab. Sasami's a kid and she sees things that aren't there. She probably got it wrong."

She sighed, stretching out on her back and gazing up at the ceiling.

"I'm all riled up, now." She added. "Tense and bothered... I'm never going to sleep at this rate."

"Well, I did try and stop you from arguing." Tenchi looked guilty. "Maybe not hard enough."

"Maybe." Ryoko acknowledged. "But she had no business being here. She's either my mother or my creator. She can't be both and it's time she made up her mind which it's going to be. I'm fed up with being messed around."

"This whole mother thing bothers you more than you like to let her see, doesn't it?"

"Perhaps it does." Ryoko shot him a rueful smile. "But don't tell her that. I'm not going to give her another weakness to harpoon."

"Then can we go to bed now? Please?"

"Well, you can." Ryoko touched his cheek gently, reaching up to kiss him. "I'm too het up to sleep right at the moment. I'm going to go out for a bit... I'll be back before you know it, so don't wait up. You need your sleep, and I'll only fidget."

"You don't want me to come with you?" Tenchi questioned. Ryoko shook her head, gesturing towards the pile of study books.

"You have work to do, still." She reminded him. "Don't worry. I'll be all right. I'll take Ryo Ohki... right, Ryo Ohki?"

Ryo Ohki raised startled golden eyes to her mistress's, and Ryoko felt a wave of objection flutter through her senses. She frowned.

"You don't get a choice in the matter." She said firmly. "I need you... I want to go up above the Earth and get some perspective... and I need you for that."

Ryo Ohki sighed, resignation entering her expression, and Ryoko nodded.

"That's better." She agreed. "All right, Tenchi. Sweet dreams — I'll see you in a couple of hours. I'll be back for breakfast, no worries — get some sleep. And don't worry about Washu. She probably traded in her sensitivity for computer componants a long time ago. She'll be all right."

"Well, I guess I should know my daughter always says things

exactly as she sees them.”

Washu pushed open the door of her lab, slipping inside as the door disappeared behind her. Carefully she flared the lights, glancing around at her domain with troubled, clouded eyes. Gadetry cluttered every surface, and computer parts were jammed into every crack and crevasse, giving the expansive chamber the illusion of being much smaller than it actually was. For a moment she just stood there, taking it all in. Then she sighed heavily, shaking her head as if to clear it.

Stepping between cracked sections of circuitboard, she made her way slowly through the lab to the furthest corner, pausing for a moment to check that she was alone. A glance behind her assured her that Yume had long since left her work and settled to sleep on the pallet that had become hers since she had come to live at the Masaki home, and a quick examination of her assistant told Washu that Yume had indeed shut her systems down for the night.

“So much the better.” She murmured, lapsing into her native tongue as she placed her hands up against the wall, feeling for the hidden switch. Finally she located it, flipping it down as the wall panel swung back, revealing the tiny vault beyond. Carefully and reverently she reached in, extracting the carved Kii chest and holding it tightly for a moment, as if summoning the courage to open it. Then, at length, she unfastened the catch, lifting the lid and sliding her fingers beneath the cool gold links of the chain that nestled against the fabric lining inside.

Very slowly she lifted the chain out, running her touch over the damaged clasp as she remembered the day she had first received it.

“Mikamo.” She murmured, tears sparkling in the depths of her eyes as she pictured his face. “How could Ryoko ever understand? Maybe *this is my life*. Maybe science *has* become my whole world. But what would she become, if Tenchi was taken away from her? She doesn’t have any idea what it’s like, to be the one left behind.”

She sighed, leaning up against the cool laboratory wall as she wound the chain absently around her fingers.

“She doesn’t understand that remembering when she came to be makes me remember him, and why I fashioned her in the first place.” She whispered, as the tears began to spill silently down her cheeks. “That the whole purpose of Ryoko’s life was revenge... revenge against the man who murdered the one man that ever loved me. Kagato destroyed all my hopes of future happiness, when he took Mikamo from me. How can I explain that to my hot-tempered,

impulsive daughter? She doesn't live in the past... and she'd never understand."

"Washu?"

Yume's sleepy voice startled her out of her reverie and she clutched the chain more tightly in her grip, dashing away her tears as she stared at the stirring droid in consternation.

"I thought you were powered down for the night!"

"I was." Yume nodded, gazing up at her mentor in confusion. "But I heard you, talking to yourself. You sounded sad, Washu, even if I couldn't understand your words. Are you all right?"

"Your human instincts override your electronic ones sometimes, don't they?" Washu sighed. "I didn't realise. It's nothing, Yume. I'm all right."

"No, you're not." Yume was on her feet now, taking Washu's hands in hers as her sharp optical circuits registered the glittering wetness on her friend's lashes. "You've... are you crying?"

"I'm fine." Washu turned away, returning the chain to the box and fastening it firmly once more. "It's nothing."

"The only time I've ever seen you come close to crying before was when you thought Ryoko might die from Hotsuma's ghost spell." Yume said softly. "And my optics are not subjective. You can't tell me you weren't crying. It's right here, in my digital memory. So tell me what's on your mind, Washu-san. Maybe I can help."

"You wouldn't understand." Washu sighed, slipping the box back into the hidden unit and shutting the door with a firm click. "Just memories. Nothing important."

"I wouldn't understand because I'm a robot?"

"No." Washu shook her head. "I just..."

She faltered, grimacing.

"I'm not usually so weak." She said frankly, embarrassment in her tones. "Ryoko and I had a fight... and she said something that got to me. That's all."

"A fight?" Yume looked startled. "I thought you and Ryoko had a fairly progressive relationship, on the whole. You've never had a serious fight since I've been living with you."

"Well, something set her off tonight." Washu sighed. "I think she

has a bee in her bonnet about her birthday, whatever she says to the contrary. And with her usual reckless abandon, she managed to rake up some pretty unpleasant memories for me without even knowing she'd done it. That's all. I'll be all right, just as soon as I get them back into their right place."

"Memories?"

"Yes. From a long time ago."

"From Kihaku?"

"No..." Washu shook her head. "No. A time after that. A time before Ryoko was born — a time when I considered giving up my science and my work to pursue a different life completely."

"A different...?" Yume's eyes almost fell out of her head, and Washu looked rueful.

"It's hard to imagine, isn't it?" She said self-consciously. "Ryoko isn't far wrong when she says my life is my lab. But I made that choice, and it was the right one. The other life — it never came to be. It was... it was taken away from me by that Dark Prince, Kagato. I lost someone very important to me, and it changed how I view everything. Ryoko really doesn't understand, but I just want her to be happy with Tenchi. She and I aren't so very different, after all. She just doesn't know it."

"Perhaps because you hide that side of you from her." Yume said thoughtfully. "You conceal your feelings behind banter and deception a lot of the time. Ryoko is very direct, and I think she expects others to be, also. She doesn't realise, when you deflect things, that you're not always in earnest. Perhaps you should explain that to her."

"And dig up all those feelings and memories again?" Washu shook her head firmly. "No. I'm all right now, and it's locked away where it should be again. That part of my life — before my imprisonment — is nothing to me now. All of it is irrelevant and there's no reason to go back there. After all, as Ryoko says herself, she's no longer my weapon."

It was beyond all belief.

Zakari paced restlessly across the worn flooring of his small, dilapidated apartment chamber, his brow creased in concentration as he ruminated over all the things he had discovered. Scraps of paper mingled with shards of glass littered the ground at his feet, some

charred, others torn, and as his gaze caught them, a rueful expression touched his unusual features. So he had lost his temper a little, he acknowledged. At least this time there had been no one here to see it.

“But it’s time I stopped researching and started doing.” He decided, clenching his fists as he gazed up towards the darkening Heiwan skyline. “It’s getting late, and if I’m going to make my move, I need to do it now. I only hope that using my spaceship isn’t going to alert the world to my whereabouts. I’ve done my best to cloak it, but I’ve learnt of late that sometimes doing your best just isn’t good enough. I don’t want to hurt anyone that I don’t have to, but it’s better that they don’t come after me. If they knew what I really was, they’d hunt me down and destroy me anyway.”

He frowned, casting one last glance at the scattered shards across the floor.

“But this can’t wait any longer.” He resolved. “Clay’s records were useful — but incomplete. Washu Hakubi seems to be the kind of scientist who covers her tracks well. And yet, I found enough to tell me what I wanted to know. Professor Hakubi was involved in this program in some capacity. She must have been. And there are more of me... or at least, there’s one more of me. The girl. Ryoko. A prisoner of Washu’s even now, on the Earth, where that mad old witch has stationed her laboratory.”

His eyes narrowed into slits as he considered his possibilities.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone on the Earth, but I can’t let Washu Hakubi continue to behave in this way.” He said softly. “For all I know it’s very likely she was involved in my creation, and even now she continues to enslave one like me on her remote, distant little rock. But then, she’s invested so much time and study into this one. This Ryoko. Clay’s final journal notes mention very clearly that she was still under Washu’s mentorship and that there were scientific notes regarding her right up to the time at which he expired. That means that her work is still ongoing, and that Ryoko might well be the key to luring Washu out of hiding. I can kill two birds with one stone here. I can free one like me and avenge us both.”

He allowed himself a faint smile as he slipped his jacket over his shoulders, buttoning it as he headed out to his waiting spacecraft. A click of his black device brought a shimmering gold beam down onto the stone-chips below, and he stepped decidedly into it, allowing himself to be drawn upwards and into the belly of his craft. The transfer sent shockwaves through his unstable molecules, and he shivered involuntarily as he stepped into the drive room, feeling the

all too familiar prickles of energy dart up and down his spinal column as he settled himself in the pilot's seat.

As he opened the throttle, surging his small, angular craft up through the thick cloud layer and out into the bleakness of space, he pondered absently on how used he was becoming to the random tremors and flickers that now plagued his body on a regular basis. And yet, he knew that they were only the warning signals.

"The smoke before the volcano erupts." He muttered, gripping tightly to the controls as he swerved to avoid a meteor belt, checking his navigation screen as he plotted a course for the Solar System and planet Earth. "So I'd better be very, very careful. From everything I've discovered on Professor Washu, it seems to me like she's been using her Ryoko creation to do more than just lab tests. From what Clay suggests, this woman has been operating as some kind of space thief, not to mention a custom built assassin. Most likely she's been manipulated by Washu into stealing and killing, as part of the directive under which she's been operating. Considering what Clay did to my memories, it wouldn't surprise me to find that his partner in crime is sinking to similar levels of depravity... after all, Clay never saw me as anything more than a robot and an object for him to discard when my time was done. I've known enough scientists to know that sometimes their obsession can override their consciences, and I know that Washu Hakubi has a dubious Galactic reputation as it is. Kicked out of the Science Academy on two occasions — I have absolutely no doubt that she worked with Clay outside that organisation, as well as within it. More than that, I'm certain she wouldn't let a little thing like professional ethics stop her from putting her science to any nefarious use."

He grimaced.

"I'm also sure that Washu-sensei would go to some lengths to recover a project that could damn her reputation even further, now she's in the good favour of the Juraian Empire. Such protection might be withdrawn, if they knew all of the facets of her work." He added. "Considering that, I'm sure that Ryoko has defences of her own. It won't be so easy to subdue and capture the girl herself, especially if she is brainwashed to show her creator absolute loyalty. I must take precautions... and move carefully. After all, it isn't her I'm looking to kill."

He glanced at the navigation screen again, his eyes lighting up with pleasure as he registered the flashing blue dots that marked out planets in the expanse before him.

“At least with this ship’s hyper-jump capabilities, it’s not a long trip.” He mused. “Don’t worry, Project Ryoko. You and I, we share a grievance... and I’m going to help you find your voice!”

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

“You sure can see a lot of the Earth from up here.”

Ryoko gazed pensively out across the expanse of blackness, a slight smile touching her lips as she registered the gleaming, glittering sphere that hovered below her, holding the dusty white mass that its people called the moon tightly in its orbit. “All that blue and green... swirls of white... it’s like a giant marble, don’t you think so, Ryo Ohki? There are a million planets in the universe, but I don’t think that there are any which are quite like ours.”

Ryo Ohki leapt down from her mistress’s shoulder, letting out a mew of agreement as she pawed idly at the ashy rock beneath her feet. Clouds of whiteish dust drifted up around her as if moving in slow motion, and Ryoko grinned.

“We should come moon hopping more often, if we want a day away from the rat-race.” She mused. “Although the problem with that is that Tenchi hasn’t learnt to breathe in space yet. It’s such a pain that he can’t control his Light Hawk Wings more easily. There are a lot of places we could visit, if he didn’t need that stupid oxygen stuff all the time. Still, I guess that’s what you get for settling with someone born on a planet like that one. It’s just sad. I’d like to share this view with him.”

Ryo Ohki eyed her mistress keenly, then began sniffing at a nearby crater, extending sharp white claws as she clambered to the top of the miniature dust-stone volcano, peering inside.

“There are no rabbits on the moon, Ryo Ohki, and you’re not going to find one by hunting in there.” Ryoko was amused, crouching down at her companion’s side and reaching across to pull her back from her exploration. “You know that’s just an Earth story. The only thing with long ears and a fluffy tail up here right now is you. You do know that, don’t you? The moon is just a rock. It might look pretty and mystical from down on the Earth, but there’s nothing special up here except the view. And noone, either. Just us, and nobody else.”

Ryo Ohki rubbed up against her mistress’s hand, and Ryoko smiled.

“Well, I sure feel better for coming.” She murmured, running her fingers absently in the chalky white moondust as she did so, watching

how it glittered and glinted as it coated her skin. “It was the right thing to do, dressing for action and coming out into space for a while. Sometimes living in such close proximity to my mother is stifling and sparks fly... but I guess it will all be all right, in the end. Sometimes she just frustrates me, but I should be used to that by now. Still, coming up here has cleared my mind. I’m fine, you know. And I won’t go for Washu when we go home. She might be a weirdo, but I guess she can’t help that. And I suppose it probably grates with her, that her creation turned out to be the real beauty in the family. I should cut her some slack — she can’t help that and she probably did me a favour, all things considered.”

Ryo Ohki snorted, flicking her ears in derision, and Ryoko tweaked her companion’s tail, raising a quizzical eyebrow.

“Hey, whose side are you on?” She demanded playfully. “Don’t you think I got the looks in the family?”

Ryo Ohki eyed her for a moment. Then she burrowed out of her mistress’s grasp, giving her a playful nip on the hand as she darted away across the lunar landscape. Ryoko got to her feet, sensing the amusement that darted across the cabbit’s active mind, and she smiled, shaking her head slowly.

“Oh, you’re on.” She exclaimed, her voice echoing strangely in the thin atmosphere of the Earth’s orbiting satellite. “You better hide well, Ryo Ohki, because when I catch up with you...”

She trailed off pointedly, and Ryo Ohki’s defiance flickered faintly across her consciousness. Ryoko laughed.

“You think it’s that easy to hide from me, you little monster?” She demanded. “I don’t think so!”

She flickered out of view, re-materialising atop a hefty lump of eroded stone as she scanned the horizon for any sign of her small companion. Faint paw-shadows in the snow-like dust soon caught her eye and she launched herself into the air, speeding across the ground in the direction that Ryo Ohki had headed. The lesser gravity and the lack of atmosphere meant that she had to check her speed at intervals, and at length she gave up on flying altogether, padding across the lunar landscape on foot as she tracked down Ryo Ohki’s whereabouts.

A mischievous twitch at her senses told her the cabbit was nearby and she spun around, seeing a flash of brown fur disappearing into one of the craters. Before Ryoko could react, Ryo Ohki had darted out of another one, zipping across the ground and flicking her ears cheekily as she disappeared over the rise. Ryoko frowned.

“No fair using the gravity to cheat! You know I can’t fly so well up here!” She exclaimed, putting her hands on her hips. “Stop being a pest, Ryo Ohki — just because you were built to navigate all kinds of atmospherics doesn’t mean we all were!”

A defiant yowl echoed out from across the horizon, and Ryoko grimaced.

“Oh, I see. This is your revenge for me dragging you up here so late at night, is it?” She realised. “Well, I already told you once, Ryo Ohki... you’re messing with the wrong pirate if that’s your game!”

For a moment there was no response, and Ryoko frowned, hesitating as she glanced across at the barren surroundings.

“Ryo Ohki?” She called. “Hey, that’s not funny. Stop shielding yourself from me! I will find you, whether you hide or whether you don’t!”

A sudden wave of panicked energy washed through Ryoko’s brain at that juncture and she let out a gasp, stumbling despite herself at the force of Ryo Ohki’s terror. Taking a deep breath to calm her own nerves, for the cabbit’s senses were close enough to her own to impact upon them, she launched herself up into the air, casting her gaze anxiously around her as she did so.

“Ryo Ohki? Dammit, where are you? What are you screaming about — what happened? Don’t tell me you really did find a moon rabbit... where are you, you silly cabbit?”

There was no response, and try as she might, Ryoko could no longer sense her small companion’s whereabouts.

“Ryo Ohki.” She whispered, anxiety overtaking annoyance as she realised that something was seriously amiss. “But... where *are* you? Talk to me, damn you! I can’t help you if I don’t know where you are!”

“Your spaceship will be quite all right, Ryoko. I assure you of that.”

A fresh voice assailed her senses, jerking her back to herself as she spun around, every nerve and sinew tensing as she registered the presence of a stranger.

“Who are you and why are you stalking me here?” She demanded. “If you’re some kind of pirate, I’m warning you, I’m not someone you want to try to rob.”

“I haven’t come here to fight with you.” The stranger held up his hands in a gesture of peace, and Ryoko’s eyes narrowed as she

digested his words. She shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter to me.” She said darkly. “What did you do to Ryo Ohki? Why can’t I reach her? Where is she? I swear, if you’ve harmed her...”

“Ryo Ohki is a spaceship.” The man seemed surprised. “You act like she’s a living being.”

“That shows how much you know about anything.” Electricity flickered from Ryoko’s fingers, sending up an eerie glow as her magic was charged by the feeble lunar atmosphere. “Answer my question. Where is she, and *what did you do with her?*”

The man did not reply at first, and despite herself Ryoko bristled at the intensity of his gaze. Then he offered her a slight smile.

“I stunned her. That’s all.” He admitted. “I didn’t want you to leave before we’d had a chance to speak. I’m sorry. I didn’t realise she was more to you than just a travel craft. But then I suppose I should have realised. After all, you are both products of the same genius mind, are you not?”

“What?” Ryoko froze, gazing at him in disbelief. “What did you say? *What* did you call me?”

“You know exactly what I mean, so I don’t think I need spend time rehashing the details.” The man said evenly. “I don’t have much of it to waste, and I’d rather not fight with you. I’m not your enemy, Ryoko. I’m your ally. Believe me. I came here to help you. Not hurt you.”

Ryoko clenched her fists, hovering above the ground as she slowly advanced on him. All the while the electricity around her fingers grew stronger and brighter, until at length it forged into a ghostly rendition of her usual amber sabre.

“Anyone who hurts Ryo Ohki is no friend of mine.” She said blackly. “I don’t know who you are, where you’ve come from, or why. But it’s time you started explaining yourself. Who told you my name? Why do you think you know something about me or my spaceship? Who sent you after me... and why?”

“Ryoko...”

“*Answer me!*” Ryoko sent a flare of orange energy across the landscape, narrowly missing the man’s right foot as it scorched into the ground. “I’m not playing games with you. I want to know! Believe me, it’s not in your interests to fight me.”

“Nor is it in yours to fight me, but if it saves time, I can do things that way.”

The man sighed, flexing his hands as a strange whitish glow engulfed his body from head to foot. “If you won’t listen to reason, I’ll have to take you by force. I apologise in advance — I didn’t want to have to do it this way, but I knew there was a chance you wouldn’t be easy to reason with.”

“You think you can take me out?” Ryoko demanded. “One of the most infamous and feared space pirates of all time?”

“I don’t want to.” The man repeated. “It’s up to you. You could stand down, and listen to what I have to say.”

“I don’t waste time listening to freaks who bully my spaceship and creep up on me from behind!” Ryoko reacted angrily, launching herself in the stranger’s direction as hot energy pulsed from her hands into a crackling ball of lightning. “I’m no easy take, so don’t think you can cow me so easily!”

The man sighed, looking regretful. Then he brought his hands together, the white light around him shimmering and flaring as Ryoko’s bolt of energy made contact with it. As the aura intensified, Ryoko felt a burning sensation shoot through her senses, and the world exploded into a dazzling whiteness around her as she found herself spinning back across the lunar landscape. She struggled to regain her balance, but in the searing brightness of the man’s power, she found she could not even find her bearings, and as the second flare hit her, she crumpled, tumbling to the ground as she fought to catch her breath.

As her consciousness seeped out of her, she was faintly aware of the outline of a figure looming closer and closer through the white haze.

And then everything went black.

“Ryoko!”

Tenchi sat up in bed, drawing a sharp breath of air into his lungs as he struggled to free himself from the blankets that tangled around his body. From outside the window, the first streams of the dawn light were beginning to break the horizon, and he frowned, squinting at the clock through sleep-clouded eyes.

“Just about five.” He murmured. “But where... what woke me? What was I dreaming about? And Ryoko...”

He paused, glancing around him as he registered the fact his fiancée was nowhere to be seen, and his brows drew together as a sudden feeling of unease settled in the pit of his stomach.

“I was dreaming about Ryoko.” He realised, now alert as he tossed back his bedcovers, clambering out of bed and pushing open the door of his room as he hurried down the corridor towards the little room that Ryoko often claimed as her own. “But where is she? Did she come back and go to her own room? I thought she was coming to mine... but I must have fallen asleep. I was so tired... all that studying... did she just not want to disturb me?”

He flung back the door of Ryoko’s chamber, stopping dead as he realised that room was also empty. Ryoko’s nightclothes lay carelessly tossed over the end of the bed, and the cupboard door was flung back, indicative of her wild hike into space the night before.

“She wasn’t in any mood to tidy after her, when she got changed to go flying with Ryo Ohki.” Tenchi murmured, sinking down on the end of her rumpled bedclothes as he contemplated the situation. “But if she had come back here, surely she’d have at least closed the door? Why do I have such a bad feeling about this... surely she’s just over the shrine gateway or up a tree somewhere?”

A scrabbling at the window alerted him to the fact he was not alone and he got to his feet, moving cautiously across to the pane glass as he peered outside. At first he could see nothing, but then, as he glanced down, he saw tiny paws clawing at the window frame and he frowned, slipping the catch back to allow Ryo Ohki entrance to the room.

“Well, you’re here.” He murmured, scooping her up in his hands. “So Ryoko must have come back last night. Right?”

Ryo Ohki raised mournful golden eyes to his at the sound of his words, pawing at his hands as she let out a sorrowful mew. Tenchi bit his lip.

“What are you trying to tell me?” He asked softly. “Something, I know. Look, come with me back to my room, okay? Then, whatever it is — well, we’ll try and figure it out. Okay?”

Ryo Ohki’s ears flickered and then dropped as she rested her head on her paws. Slowly she nodded, and Tenchi felt the twist of unease in his heart tighten once more. He gritted his teeth, heading back to his own chamber and setting his tiny furry companion down on his pillow.

“Right.” He said quietly. “I’m listening. What’s happened, Ryo Ohki? Something I should know about?”

Ryo Ohki let out a mournful yowl, flicking her ears once more, and Tenchi’s eyes widened as he registered their tattered ends. Grabbing the cabbit up with little regard for her comfort, he peered more closely at his small ally, realising as he did so that sections of her fur were charred and that her tiny sharp claws were scuffed from more than just her climb up the side of the house.

“Ryoko.” He murmured, then, “Ryo Ohki, tell me now. What happened to Ryoko?!”

Ryo Ohki leapt gracefully out of Tenchi’s grip, curling up on his pillow as she uttered another tragic yowl. Tears glittered in the depths of her amber eyes, and Tenchi’s heart skipped a beat.

“What are you trying to say?” He whispered. “Oh, this is useless! I can’t understand a word you’re saying to me! Something’s happened to Ryoko, that much is clear. You came back last night — but she didn’t? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

Ryo Ohki eyed him mournfully for a moment, then she nodded her head, letting out a whimper.

“You left her behind?”

Ryo Ohki shook her head, and as the small creature’s tears began to spill onto Tenchi’s pillows, the young prince frowned.

“She... left *you* behind?” He hazarded. Ryo Ohki raised her gaze to his, and Tenchi knew he had guessed correctly. His brows knitted together.

“But she wouldn’t do that. Would she?” He asked. “You two are connected. You’d know, and besides, she wouldn’t take off and leave you. You’re bonded — she’d never do that.”

Ryo Ohki mewed again, and Tenchi’s heart constricted.

“Unless...” He murmured. “Something happened when you went flying, didn’t it? Something bad, and it split you from Ryoko. Is that right? Is that what you want to say?”

Ryo Ohki nodded dolefully, and Tenchi frowned, scooping the small creature up carefully in his hands once more as he stroked her fur gently.

“And you can’t tell where it is Ryoko’s gone?” He asked quietly.

Ryo Ohki shook her head, flicking her tattered ears as if to add

emphasis to her point, and Tenchi sighed.

“So your bond has been broken again.” He realised. “And that’s not a good sign. The last time...”

He faltered, remembering the last time that the cabbit’s connection to the pirate had been disrupted, and for a moment despair washed over him. Then he got a grip on himself, shaking his head.

“We’re going to speak to Washu.” He said decidedly, getting to his feet and heading out of the bedroom towards the stairs. “You can speak to her more easily than you can me, and we can play twenty questions all day without me getting exactly the right answers out of you. I know you have more to tell me, Ryo Ohki, and I know that we can sort this out, somehow. So hang on tight, okay? If Washu isn’t awake, well, we’re going to wake her and get to the bottom of this right away.”

Ryo Ohki rubbed up against Tenchi’s fingers, licking the tips with her tiny, rough tongue and to his surprise, Tenchi realised that his small companion was shivering.

“You’re cold?” He wondered. “Or weak? Which is it? Are you hurt? You’re singed and battered, but are you wounded, Ryo Ohki?”

Ryo Ohki shook her head, leaping up onto his shoulder as if to prove her point, and Tenchi let out a sigh of relief.

“Well, at least that’s good.” He told her, more to convince himself than to reassure the cabbit. “You’re just worrying about Ryoko, huh? Poor Ryo Ohki. You must have been scared, coming back here on your own.”

Ryo Ohki pawed at his ear in agreement, and Tenchi nodded.

“Washu will know what to do.” He said firmly. “So just sit tight. She’ll know, Ryo Ohki. She’ll be able to find Ryoko.”

At that moment they reached the door of the lab and Tenchi raised his hand, knocking sharply on the wood-panel door. For a moment there was no response, then it swung back of its own accord, allowing the two, prince and cabbit, to step into the gloomy depths of Washu’s sub-space laboratory.

“Tenchi!” The scientist herself greeted him from across the other side of the chamber, raising her hand as the lights in the room brightened. “What brings you here at this hour... isn’t it early, considering what time you went to bed?”

“I could say the same to you.” Tenchi remarked, realising as he did

so that Washu's thick red hair was braided back from her face and that she still wore her own night clothes beneath her dressing gown. Washu smiled ruefully, gesturing to her attire.

"As you can see, I'm only just up." She said, as if in explanation. "I didn't expect company quite so soon."

"This is something of an emergency." Tenchi said quietly. "Washu, Ryoko didn't come back to the house last night."

"Back to the house?" Washu frowned. "I thought she was sleeping in your room. Did you do something to scare her off, Tenchi?"

"No. She was riled up after your little exchange of words." Tenchi shook his head. "She took Ryo Ohki up above the Earth to knock some of the frustration out of her. I guess I fell asleep, but she wasn't there when I woke up this morning."

"So she hasn't come back yet?" Washu looked confused. "You can't pretend she's exactly the punctual type. She's probably got distracted by something... why are you so anxious about it? Ryo Ohki's here, so Ryoko is probably loitering around the shrine, as usual."

"Ryo Ohki didn't come back to the Earth with Ryoko, Washu." Tenchi shook his head grimly. "I knew when I woke — something wasn't right. Something woke me. I think I was dreaming about Ryoko... and a bright, bright light. But I can't remember anything else. I just know that it woke me, and then Ryo Ohki was scrabbling at the window, to get in. Look at her, Washu. Her fur is all singed and dusty, and I think she's broken a couple of her claws."

"Broken?" Washu's eyes widened, and she held out her hands to the cabbit, who leapt the short distance from Tenchi's shoulder into her creator's waiting grip. "Oh, Ryo Ohki! What has that bad daughter of mine done to you now? Look at your poor ears — there go your aerodynamics! These are nasty tears — you'll have to be very careful navigating until these properly heal up!"

Ryo Ohki shook her head frantically, mewing loudly, and Washu frowned, holding her companion up to the light so she could see her more clearly.

"I don't speak cabbit, but I think Ryo Ohki has lost her connection to Ryoko again." Tenchi said quietly. "I can't be more specific than that — but you can read her thoughts, can't you? I mean, if you activate her gem... you can find out what happened?"

"Moon dust." Washu said thoughtfully, more than half to herself, and Tenchi's brow creased in bewilderment.

“I beg your pardon?”

“On Ryo Ohki’s fur.” Washu glanced up at him. “All over it, in fact. Is that where you went hunting, Ryo Ohki? Ryoko took you to the moon? Don’t tell me you were looking for rabbits, and you fell down a crater.”

Ryo Ohki arched her back indignantly, shaking her head once more, and Washu pursed her lips.

“Then you’ll have to give me more than that.” She said simply. “Hold still, Ryo Ohki, and focus all your thoughts on what you wanted to tell Tenchi. I’ll see what I can grasp.”

Ryo Ohki obediently lowered her head, closing her big amber eyes as Washu placed her index finger gently against the cabbit’s red energy crystal, causing it to glow with a strange pinkish light.

“What’s going on?” Yume’s voice from the back room alerted Tenchi to the fact the droid was also awake. “Tenchi? It’s early, isn’t it?”

“Ryoko’s disappeared.” Tenchi said simply. “She and Ryo Ohki went flying last night, but Ryo Ohki came back alone.”

“What?” Surprise flooded Yume’s features. “How is that even possible?”

“It’s possible.” Washu said grimly, releasing her touch on the cabbit’s brow at that moment and the gem shimmered and faded back to its sleeping state. “Ryo Ohki doesn’t know much more than what she’s told you, Tenchi. But you’re right — she can’t sense Ryoko at all. She remembers them playing on the moon — they were just minding their own business, having fun. I think they were in the middle of some kind of a game. Someone came up on Ryo Ohki from behind, and something hit her, hard and fast. Some memories are missing then, so I think she was probably knocked completely senseless. The next thing she knew, she was alone. She flew all round the moon a few times, and called out for Ryoko telepathically and verbally, but she got no response.”

“And you didn’t see what hit you, Ryo Ohki?” Tenchi asked gently. Ryo Ohki shook her head.

“She just remembers the shadow falling on the lunar landscape. A man, it looked like to me, but she only caught a fleeting glance.” Washu said thoughtfully. “It seems that someone else was up there on the moon last night. And that someone is the answer to where Ryoko is right now.”

“You think she’s been abducted?” Horror flooded Tenchi’s expression, and Washu nodded.

“Ryoko is the kind of person who makes enemies as easily as she does friends. Perhaps more easily.” She agreed. “And it’s more than possible that she and Ryo Ohki stumbled into something they shouldn’t have done. With the Earth opening its boundaries to other planetary involvement, I’m sure there’s already a thriving interstellar black market in operation. The moon might well be a base for smuggling. It’s well positioned and uninhabited. Plus, as I’m sure Ryo Ohki can tell you, there’s a tremendous network of tunnels beneath the surface.”

“But Ryoko wouldn’t let herself be taken without a fight.” Yume pointed out. “We all know her well enough to know that she’s capable of fighting her corner.”

“Yes.” Washu nodded. “It worries me slightly that whoever it was took Ryo Ohki out of the equation first. It suggests some knowledge of the cabbit ship and Ryoko’s mode of transport. Which suggests we could once more be dealing with pirates who knew Ryoko in her past life, Tenchi.”

“Pirates again?” Anger flickered in Tenchi’s brown eyes. “When are they going to let up? Ryoko isn’t a pirate any more!”

“Well, to the pirates, she still is. At least, she’s still there to be taken out. Her reputation is probably still pretty much held in awe, even though she’s long since abandoned that lifestyle.” Washu said absently. “She did commit a lot of crimes, and pirates are impressed by that kind of wild daring.”

“Pirates.” Yume frowned. “Do you really think pirates would come to the Earth, or take Ryoko hostage? Why? What could they gain from it?”

“Since Ryo Ohki can’t contact Ryoko, I guess there must be something we’re not seeing.” Washu sighed. “I can only tell you what Ryo Ohki knows, Yume. That’s all. I’m not Ryoko. I can’t sense every thought Ryo Ohki has. I can only read through her memories as they stand.”

Ryo Ohki mewed sadly, rubbing her tattered ears up against her creator’s skin, and Washu smiled down at her.

“We’ll get you cleaned up, and then I guess we have to start working out how to find my daughter.” She said resignedly. “Again. I swear, she’ll turn me grey before my time at this rate.”

“You don’t think...” Tenchi swallowed hard, eying Washu doubtfully, and Washu looked surprised.

“I don’t think what, Tenchi?” She asked curiously.

“If Ryo Ohki can’t get through, you don’t think it means that whatever it was... *killed* Ryoko?” Tenchi asked tentatively. Washu frowned, and for a moment there was silence. Then the scientist sighed.

“We can’t rule it out.” She admitted. Tenchi closed his eyes, forcibly bringing his emotions under control. Then he shook his head.

“I won’t believe that until I have no other choice.” He said thickly. “There must be other reasons why Ryo Ohki might not get through, surely? Maybe she’s too far away? Or something is blocking the connection. She doesn’t have to be dead... right?”

“As you say.” Washu nodded. “We don’t know, but I agree. We should work on the premise she is alive, until we know otherwise.”

“Thank you.” Tenchi looked relieved. “And Washu? Thank you for helping, too. I know what Ryoko said to you last night upset you.”

“Don’t worry about me. My skin is much tougher than that.” Washu said flippantly. “I don’t hurt so easily as you think, believe me. And as for Ryoko, well, I do take some responsibility for her. She might be crazy, but I did bring her into this world. Such is the fate of a mother, I’m afraid. Remember that, Tenchi, before you think about starting a family. Kids are often more trouble than they’re worth and whatever you do, you can never quite sever the ties.”

Tenchi frowned, a shadow touching his dark eyes.

“Right now I’m more worried about getting my fiancée back.” He said quietly. “One step at a time. She’s the only thing I’m thinking of right now.”

“We’ll find her, Tenchi-kun.” Yume put a reassuring hand on his arm. “I’ll help Washu in any way I can, you know that. We’ll track her down. Whoever’s got her, we’ll find them and bring her home.”

“I hope you’re right.” Tenchi bit his lip. “I know she gets herself into these things, but I can’t help but worry about her.”

“Tell me again what you sensed, when you woke up.” Washu questioned. Tenchi frowned.

“Not much. Like I said, just a sensation that something was wrong.” He replied. “Ryoko and a bright light, that’s all I remember.”

“Then we should try and find out whether your dream was a coincidence or true to life.” Washu said decidedly. “Ryoko was last seen on the moon, so the moon is the first place we should visit. If for no other reason but to find out if there’s been any kind of random lunar flare within the last few hours.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

“Oww.”

Ryoko opened her eyes, struggling to pull herself into a sitting position as she glanced around her at her surroundings. Surprise and consternation touched her features as she registered the fact she was in a strange place, and as she shuffled back against the hard steel wall, she squinted through the dim light, trying in vain to find a familiar landmark.

“Where in hell am I?” She muttered, putting a hand to her head as the room swam slightly before her gaze. “What happened to me? What is this place?”

As her eyes became more used to the darkness, she found that she was in what had once been a laboratory, although as she pulled herself to her feet, she realised that it had not been used as such for quite some time. Fumbling against the wall, she finally found the light switch and as brightness bathed the room, she let out a little gasp, shards of memory penetrating her befuddled senses.

“That light!” She whispered. “I was on the moon... with Ryo Ohki. And then...”

She frowned, glancing around her for any sign of the cabbit, but there was none.

“Ryo Ohki?” She called, sending out a series of psychic impulses as she sought to locate her companion’s whereabouts. “Are you here? Do you know where here is?”

There was no reply, and Ryoko bit down on her lip hard as she remembered the creature’s mental squeal of panic.

“Something stunned her. Something, or *someone*.” She said slowly, rubbing her temples as things began to get clearer. “That man... who was he? What did he want? Did *he* do this to me?”

She frowned, shaking her head.

“I’m not going to sit and pander to the whims of madmen.” She said decisively. “If he is the one who brought me to this dump of a place, well, he’s going to learn that you can’t imprison a space pirate quite so

easily as that. It was silly to take his eyes off me — I'm outta here!"

She pressed her hand against the wall, focusing her thoughts as she tried to phase through the thick panels of steel, but it was to no avail, and she gazed down at her fingers in surprise.

"Not working?" She wondered. "Why not? What is this place made of, anyway?"

She gazed upwards, her sharp eyes taking in the ceiling tiles and the thin lines that marked points of structural weakness. With a resolute nod, she launched herself upwards, but without any momentum behind her, she dropped back down to the ground, falling with a hard thud on the cold floor beneath.

"What the...?" Ryoko frowned, gazing back up at the ceiling, then down at herself. "Why can't I fly? Why can't I phase? What's going on here?"

"I had to take precautions to make sure you wouldn't escape before I'd had a chance to speak to you."

The voice startled her, echoing eerily through the abandoned laboratory and she wheeled around, anger sparking in her amber eyes as she faced her companion accusingly.

"You again!" She exclaimed. "You brought me here, didn't you? What do you think you're playing at, you creep? Why did you attack me, on the Moon? I swear, if this is some kind of sick fantasy you're fulfilling..."

"I'm not here to hurt you." The man held up his hands, and Ryoko snorted, shaking her head.

"Tell that to my headache." She muttered. "I don't like people who force me places against my will. Explain yourself, and quickly! Even if this room is shielded against magic, I can still take you out."

"This room has no such shield on it. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to plan something specific to your own particular gifts." The man shook his head regretfully. Out of the corner of her eye, Ryoko saw his fingers flicker over a small black contraption, and thick lengths of steel rope shot out suddenly from the wall behind her, looping themselves around her arms. As she struggled to escape their grasp, she realised that two thin metal bands encircled each wrist, and a cold chill touched her heart.

"Prison bracelets." She whispered, then, "You've cuffed me, you bastard!"

"I'm afraid I had no choice. You're very strong." The man nodded his head slightly. "You needn't struggle... in fact, I'd rather you didn't. I don't want you hurt if I can help it — that's not what this is about. But the steel wires are tuned to the bracelets and will follow them wherever you go. They can't be evaded, so you might as well give up trying. Without your magic, there's nothing you can do to stop them."

"You..." As the thick snakes of steel fixed themselves more securely to Ryoko's cuffs, the pirate dropped down onto the ground, defiance and indignation in her golden eyes. "You have a lot of explaining to do, whoever you are. What is all of this, anyway? And what happened to Ryo Ohki? Where's my ship, damn you? What did you do with her?"

"I have absolutely no idea." The man told her frankly, and somehow Ryoko realised he was telling her the truth. "I told you, I only stunned her to prevent *you* from escaping. I hoped we could talk up there, in peace, without all of this. But I was afraid I might have to bring you here. I've read a lot about you, and I know you put up a pretty strong fight. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to break that woman's control over you unless I took you well away from her base."

"That woman?" Ryoko's anger faded into confusion as she stared at him in bewilderment. "What woman? What control? I don't understand. Have you slipped a screw somewhere? Because you're starting to sound more and more like a random nutcase to me!"

"I'm no more crazy than you are." The man said evenly, shaking his head as he dropped down onto a vacant metal lab stool. "And I've brought you here because we have a lot in common, Ryoko."

"How do you know my name?"

"I told you. I've done my research."

"So you are some kind of creepy stalker, then?" Ryoko raised an eyebrow. "Listen, buster, I'm a taken woman. You find some other floozie to abduct and annoy, all right? This one isn't biting."

Her companion looked amused, shaking his head slowly.

"No, you have me all wrong." He said softly. "That's not the kind of research I meant."

"Well, then spit it out. What do you mean?" Ryoko demanded. "And what's your name, anyway? At least let me know what moron has me trapped here. I like to know the names of the psychos that try to get the better of the Space Pirate Ryoko!"

The man frowned, eying her keenly for a moment. Then he

shrugged.

“I suppose that my name — my true name — is nothing more than a sequence of numbers.” He said quietly. “Just like you, I was created to be someone else’s weapon.”

“What?” Ryoko’s eyes became big with surprise at this. “Someone’s... weapon?”

The man nodded.

“What my exact purpose was to be, I’m still not entirely sure.” He admitted, and Ryoko could hear a faint bitterness in his tones. “All I know is that I’m not normal — and that I wasn’t meant to live an ordinary life. I was designed by scientists with God complexes, just as you were. For a long time, I didn’t know my true origins... but now I do, I want to do something about it. In my researching, I found your name often mentioned fleetingly in scientific files. So I knew you were one like me, Ryoko. I knew you were also created, rather than born.”

Ryoko’s eyes narrowed to slits and she shook her head.

“You’re wrong.” She said flatly. “I’m no one’s machine.”

“Professor Washu Hakubi.” The man met her gaze with a challenging one of his own, and Ryoko was aware once more of the intensity that burned deep within his odd coloured eyes. “You do know that name, I trust?”

“Of course I do. What of it?”

“Who is she to you?”

“Aside from the annoying woman who lives in the closet?” Ryoko grimaced. “She’s my mother. But you know that already. Don’t you?”

“Then you do know your true origins.” The man pursed his lips. “Yet you call her mother. Why?”

“I don’t call her mother. She just is. It’s not my choice. It’s just how things are.” Ryoko bristled. “What gives you the right to know about my private affairs, anyway? I didn’t ask you to go through my history or seek me out for whatever twisted purpose you have! Let me go already! I don’t have anything to say to you on this subject or on any other!”

“Did she tell you she was your mother, Ryoko?” The man asked softly. Ryoko stared at him.

“What?”

“Did she tell you that she was your mother?” The man repeated his question, and Ryoko was sure she could see a strange glittering in his eyes. “Or did she tell you the truth? That you were designed and created in a laboratory to serve her dark purposes? Did she happen to mention that, whilst she was securing your loyalty to her?”

“What do you think I am, some kind of puppet or slave?” Ryoko reacted angrily to this, straining against the cables as she tried to get up, but it was to no avail. “You’ve got the wrong pirate, I’m telling you. I’m noone’s puppet. I never have been. Never.”

She frowned, her eyes becoming little more than slits as she regarded him.

“You still didn’t tell me your name.”

“That’s because I don’t really have one. Although my file number is Z-0001332536893.”

“Don’t give me that garbage.” Ryoko shook her head impatiently. “You’re a man, aren’t you?”

“You can call me Z, if you like. If it’s easier for you to remember.”

“Z?” Ryoko raised an eyebrow derisively. “That’s not a name, it’s a letter.”

“And I’m not a person, I’m a science project.”

“By your definition, so am I, but you won’t catch me letting anyone call me ‘R’.” Ryoko snapped back. “You must have a name. Even if you are someone’s weapon, you don’t seem to be following their orders right now. Or are you? Are *you* someone’s puppet, after all?”

“I work alone.” Her companion said flatly, and Ryoko nodded her head.

“Then you do have a name.” She said inflexibly. “And I like to know who I’m shouting abuse at, so spill. What is it? You know I’m Ryoko, so fair is fair.”

The man sighed, glancing at his hands and Ryoko saw flickers of white light dart briefly across his fingertips.

“In a past existence I was known as Zakari.” He said finally. “Zakari Kure. I was a scientist in a research institute... before I discovered all of these things and found out who and what I really was.”

“Zakari, huh?” Ryoko pursed her lips. “Then I’m going to call you that.”

“There’s really no point. Zakari might as well be dead, considering.”

“You are a cheerful soul, aren’t you?” Ryoko shifted herself into a more comfortable position. “All right then. If you’re being a jerk and keeping me here, Zakari, you’d better tell me what it is that’s on your mind. It’s no business of yours, but I have quite a nice life I’d like to get back to, and I don’t really want to stay in this creepy dump a whole lot longer. You’re weird, plus you hurt my spaceship, and I find that hard to forgive. So spill whatever it is that’s on your mind, and then let me go already. Right?”

Zakari eyed her thoughtfully for a moment, then,

“Do you know of a man called Dr Clay?” He asked softly. Ryoko looked startled, nodding her head.

“Yes. But he’s dead. What of him?”

“Did you know him, when he was alive?”

“Briefly.” Ryoko’s brow creased in confusion. “What does he have to do with anything?”

“He was the man who built me.” Zakari admitted softly, and Ryoko’s eyes became big with amazement.

“Dr Clay? Built *you*?” She whispered. “But that idiot could hardly string anything together without stealing ideas and research from Washu!”

Zakari’s eyes narrowed.

“Washu.” He mused absently. “So I was right. They were known to one another?”

“Of course. They worked together at the Science Academy, but I don’t see what point any of this information has.” Ryoko was bewildered. “You’re darting all over the place. So Clay built you. It sucks and I’m sorry — he’s not the kind of guy I’d want for a father, and that’s for sure. But even so, he’s dead. What are you going to do? There’s not much of him to exhume, and it’s a bit late to go killing him. Which leaves you a little bit stuck, doesn’t it?”

“It is unfortunate.” Zakari acknowledged. “But it can’t be helped.”

“And what exactly do I have to do with all of this?”

“Professor Hakubi developed you from the combined genetics of herself and another.” Zakari fixed his prisoner once more with his strange, steely gaze. “She formed you in a laboratory, just as Clay

formed me. That is the truth, isn't it?"

"So what if it is?"

"I didn't come to your planet's moon to hurt you. Quite the opposite. I came to free you from her control." Zakari said simply.

"Her... control?" Ryoko's eyes almost fell out of her head. "Didn't I tell you already? Washu has no control over me or what I do. She never has had!"

"But Clay had scientific records relating to you from very recently. Right up until his death, in fact." Zakari said levelly. "Which suggests that even to this day, Washu Hakubi is conducting scientific evaluations on you and your activities. Doesn't it?"

"Well..." Despite herself, Ryoko faltered, and Zakari nodded.

"Whether she's led you to believe you're free, you never truly will be." He said bluntly. "You and I, we're not like other people. We're different, and we should stick together."

"And what, exactly, do you intend to do?" Ryoko eyed him suspiciously. "After all, you can't exactly change who you were born."

"No, but I can do something to prevent any more people from suffering the fate we have." Zakari said resolutely, white light flickering up around him as he spoke. "This kind of scientific research is wrong and dangerous, and it needs to be stopped."

He cast her a faint smile, and Ryoko felt a deep sense of foreboding wash through her senses.

"It's simple." He added. "I want you to use your strength and your magic to help me achieve that goal."

"Well, there's no doubt about it. She was here all right."

Washu crouched down, brushing her fingers gently against the Moon's surface as she examined the fine grains that clung to her skin. "This is exactly the same mineral deposit as Ryo Ohki had on her fur, so this is a good start. At least we know we're looking in the right area, if nothing else."

"That's not very comforting, Washu." Yume said softly, gazing out across the darkness towards the Earth as she did so. "Tenchi isn't going to be happy if you just go back to the ship and tell him that much. Ryo Ohki already told you they'd been to the Moon — we need to find something more than that, if we're going to find her."

“I know that.” Washu said sharply, then she sighed. “Oh, I’m getting ratty. No sleep does that to me these days — Yume, I apologise. I just wish that Ryoko wouldn’t get herself mixed up in trouble so easily. She has a natural predisposition for seeking out bad karma and that’s a fact.”

“You did design her that way.” Yume reflected, casting her companion a faint smile. “You designed her to take on Kagato, after all. All of the research Clay had me do on him when we were trying to find out about the Light Hawk Wings told me that he was the epitome of bad karma. I guess you shouldn’t be too surprised, if she winds up seeking out others.”

“That’s true.” Washu agreed ironically. “I suppose I shouldn’t complain too much. With a mix of my own bad luck and Kagato’s dark aura, it’s probably more surprising she hasn’t drawn every nutcase in the universe on her case.”

“Do you think Tenchi will be all right, if we don’t find her here?” Yume asked softly, and Washu followed her gaze to where Ryo Ohki was hovering just above the Moon’s delicate atmosphere. She sighed, shaking her head.

“Ryoko isn’t here, so that’s a moot point.” She said at length. “But at least so far he’s been calm about it. If we are going to find her, we’re all going to need level heads... recriminations and grief can wait.”

“I believe it is likely Ryoko remains alive.” Yume stepped carefully over the uneven ground, pausing to survey the landscape as she did so. “If she were dead, I’m sure we would have picked up traces of her body by this time. She’s not small enough to conceal in one of these tunnels, after all.”

“And Ryo Ohki would have found her, also.” Washu nodded. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean she’s safe, you know. She could have been taken elsewhere and slain where we can’t find her. There are a lot of possibilities — and it really doesn’t do us any good to dwell on any of them.”

Yume’s eyes narrowed at this and she didn’t answer at first. Instead she darted forwards, bending down to the ground as she ran her hand carefully and gingerly over the edge of a lump of moon rock.

“Footprints.” She said succinctly, as Washu asked her what was wrong. “At least, the faint shadow of footprints. They’re about the right size for Ryoko, and I can see paws, too. Ryo Ohki must have left those tracks.”

“I can’t see them, so I’ll have to trust in your technology and believe that they’re there.” Washu squinted over her companion’s shoulder. “Record as much as you can, Yume — we can analyse the images once we’re back on the Earth, and if you’re right then it’s something to go on, at the very least.”

“Already doing so.” Yume nodded her head. “But the tracks stop here. Ryoko must have flown from hereon in. Ryo Ohki’s tracks continue a good way in that direction. But then they too stop.”

“Well, we know that something hit Ryo Ohki, so that’s probably where she was stunned.” Washu stepped forward, eying the ground with a pensive gaze. “You know, there’s something very odd about all of this.”

“Meaning?” Yume cast her companion a startled glance, and Washu’s eyes became clouded.

“The Moon has a very specific type of atmosphere.” She said softly. “Footprints left on the surface shouldn’t be so easily brushed away. If Ryoko and Ryo Ohki did leave tracks, then they should be clearly here for all to see. But they’re not. If you didn’t see them...”

“You think someone covered up the fact they were here? Or tried to?” Yume looked surprised. Washu shook her head.

“Look at the surface.” She responded. “Look at the way the moondust has fallen. It’s like a tornado swept through this place, isn’t it? But the Moon doesn’t have that kind of weather. So...”

“So whatever caused such an outburst is probably the one who hurt Ryo Ohki and took Ryoko.” Yume said darkly. “Yes, that makes sense. But what could have this kind of power, anyway?”

“Good question.” Washu frowned. “For that I’ll need more information. Take samples of the moondust, Yume, and we’ll start from there. We’re not going to find my errant girl here, that’s for sure. But we might find another clue in the places where she’s been.”

“Washu!” As Yume bent to obey her mentor’s instructions, she let out a startled exclamation, sending her companion a stricken gaze. “Washu, look at this! It looks like blood... do you see it?”

“I see it.” Washu crouched over the small specks of red that coloured the moondust, an apprehensive look in her eye. “It’s blood all right — Ryoko’s blood? Or the blood of her assailant?”

“I think Ryoko’s blood.” Yume said softly, reaching down to pick something up from the surface. She held out her hand, and Washu bit

her lip as she realised what it was.

“Ryoko’s earring.” She murmured. “Yes, you’re probably right.”

“So she was here, and she probably didn’t leave of her own accord.” Yume straightened, slipping the earring into the pocket of her gown as she did so. “Shall I take samples of the blood too, or is it enough to assume that it’s Ryoko’s DNA we’re dealing with?”

“We should be sure.” Washu responded quietly. “If there’s even a faint chance it belongs to her attacker, it might at least give us a clue.”

“Right.” Yume nodded. “Then I’ll do that. You go back to the ship, and tell Tenchi what we know. I won’t be far behind you, but he must be getting agitated up there and you know he can’t breathe on the Moon.”

“You’re still very soft on him, aren’t you, Yume-chan?” Washu observed, and Yume’s cheeks pinkened slightly, nodding her head.

“Yes.” She admitted. “But his heart belongs to Ryoko, and I don’t like to see him so upset.”

“Then I’ll go back to Ryo Ohki, and make sure she’s ready to fly.” Washu agreed. “It’s not easy, managing that craft without Ryoko’s psychic connection. It will probably take me a while to prepare, so you have some time.”

“Okay.” Yume agreed. “I’ll be with you shortly, then.”

Washu smiled at her faintly, then flickered and blurred her form, re-materialising aboard the doleful craft as she did so.

“Washu!” Tenchi was on her in a moment, grabbing her around the wrists as he searched her expression for any sign of hope. “Well, what did you find? Is there something down there? Anything at all?”

“Footprints, but not much more.” Washu gently phased free of his grip, eying him sympathetically as she saw her companion’s expression change. “I don’t think she’s dead, Tenchi, so you mustn’t either. There’s no body on the Moon and that’s a good start. Yume is taking samples so that hopefully we can work out what took her, how and why. Ryoko’s not an easy person to overpower, after all — it’s still a possibility that she took off after someone in hot pursuit and managed to get herself lost.”

“No.” Tenchi’s eyes clouded and he turned away, gazing out through Ryo Ohki’s tinted dome at the moon’s glinting surface beneath them. “Ryoko would have come home by now. She wouldn’t get lost that easily. Washu, we have a bond, you know that. She’d be

able to find me... I'm sure of it. Just like I'm sure of what I dreamed. Ryoko was engulfed by the bright light. That's what took her. I'm certain."

"Perhaps." Washu agreed. "But maybe with Yume's samples we can ascertain what that bright light was. The Moon's surface looks like some kind of powerful surge hit it — even a typhoon or a tornado, but with no storm-clouds or rain. We're probably dealing with something quite powerful."

"Ryoko is powerful too." Tenchi sighed. "It must have been something very strong, to be able to do something like this."

"True, but Ryoko is not always rational, and she can be reckless." Washu said with a shrug. "She's not the best strategist at times, that's for sure."

"Washu, I wish you hadn't fought with her last night." Tenchi turned his gaze on the scientist, and Washu could see faint flickers of recrimination in his dark eyes. "Even if she said things that upset you, if you hadn't have argued then this would never have happened."

Washu pursed her lips.

"I don't remember starting any argument." She said evenly. "Ryoko was the one who flung her words at me, not the other way around. In fact, I'm pretty sure she did all of the yelling. I'm sorry she went off in a fit like this, but I really don't think you can lay the blame on me."

"I'm laying it on both of you." Tenchi said heavily, sinking down into Ryoko's abandoned pilot's seat. "Not just for this time, but for all times. She loses her temper and you wind her up by saying things that hurt her feelings. Why do you like to taunt her so much, Washu? She might be impulsive, but she does get upset too. Even if she reacts angrily, it doesn't mean she's not hurt."

"Perhaps the same thing could be said for both of us, Tenchi." Washu said quietly. "She is my daughter, after all."

Tenchi eyed her sharply.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we all have our own ways of protecting ourselves. Even Ryoko." Washu shrugged. "Unfortunately hers tend to get herself into more trouble in the long run, that's all. It's not easy having a child who's constantly determined to get herself killed. I didn't ask to spend my life chasing after her, trying to get her out of whatever scrape she's tumbled into now."

“Then why are you here at all?” Tenchi turned back towards the starscape, and Washu smiled ruefully.

“Because she’s my daughter.” She said simply. “Would you have expected Lady Achika to do any less for you?”

“I see.” Tenchi sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, Washu. Now I’m taking it out on you, too. I’m just worried about her, that’s all. I’m trying to stay calm, but it really isn’t easy. And I want to be down there, helping Yume or actually doing something useful. Instead I’m sitting up here — a spare part. Ryoko is my fiancée — I should be able to help her somehow!”

“You may already have done so, if your dream flash was accurate.” Washu reminded him. “It’s given us something to go on at the very least. Besides, our trip to the Moon hasn’t exactly been overly productive either, you know. We’re still no closer to working out what became of her.”

“Washu? Tenchi?” At that moment Yume materialised in the middle of Ryo Ohki’s drive room, setting down a small metal vial on the control panel as she did so. “I’ve taken all the samples you asked for, Washu, so we can leave if you like. But I found something else that might interest you... it was pushed into one of the craters, but I picked up the signal when I was scanning the ground for more prints.”

“Let me see.” Washu held out her hand, and Yume dropped the small black pip carefully into it, stepping back as she eyed it cautiously.

“I think it’s still sending out some kind of signal.” She said hesitantly. “But I’m not completely sure what type... just be gentle with it, in case I’m right.”

Washu nodded, turning it over between her fingers as she registered the fine nature of the design. At first glance it seemed little more than a stone, but her experience told her that there was more to it, and she squinted at it more closely, making out hairline cracks in the surface and the tiniest of silver screws holding the device together. Her eyes darkened.

“This is an electronic surveillance device.” She muttered. “Someone expected us to go to the moon, looking for Ryoko. They wanted to know what we’d do, when we got there.”

“That tiny thing?” Tenchi looked startled, and Yume nodded her head.

“That’s what I thought. As I said, I picked up the signal.” She

agreed, moving towards the back of the craft and ducking beneath Ryo Ohki's jagged frame as she rummaged through Washu's portable equipment. "Maybe there's something we brought with us that can tell us more. I think it's operating on a wide frequency though, Washu-san... so far, I haven't been able to trace the signal to the source. Whatever built it has some expertise, because the transmission has been periodically scrambled and I can't unscramble it."

"But if we could, might it lead us to Ryoko?" Tenchi asked. Before Washu could answer, the small black unit began to glimmer and vibrate, sending out a bright wave of translucent holographic energy all around it as it hovered up out of the scientist's palm. As they watched, the light beams stabilised into the image of a man, becoming more and more vivid with each passing moment.

"Washu Hakubi." The voice was grainy and uneven, but there was a soft resolution to the speaker's tone, and inwardly Washu tensed.

"Who are you and what do you want?" She demanded. "You obviously left your little toy here for us to find, so explain yourself and do it fast!"

"My name is Z." The man said levelly. "You are seeking your creation, are you not? The Space Pirate, Project Ryoko. Am I correct?"

"Ryoko!" Tenchi let out an exclamation. "Do you have her? Where is she? What have you done with her?"

"Ryoko is quite safe." The man turned his gaze on the young prince, his odd eyes narrowing as he took in the man's appearance. "You are a Prince of Jurai. Why are you aboard a pirate ship built by a scientist up to no good?"

"Answer his questions." Washu said coldly. "And stop asking your own. What do you want with me or my daughter? I don't even know who you are, let alone why you'd try and interfere in our lives."

"I don't have time for explanations." The man shook his head slightly. "If you want to see your devil caller again, Washu Hakubi, follow my coordinates and meet me on the abandoned planetoid you find there."

"I want to speak to Ryoko!" Washu demanded, but the man smiled coolly.

"Ryoko will not come to any harm at my hand." He said smoothly. "So long as you prove cooperative, I will remain discreet. In any case, my business is not with her. My business is with you. Come, Washu Hakubi, and I will answer all of your questions in person."

With that his image flickered and faded, and with a final, high-pitched whine, the small device exploded into dust, sending sharp fragments of metal and circuitry flying across Ryo Ohki's cockpit.

"What the...?" Tenchi dropped to the ground as shards narrowly missed scraping through his skin. "Who was that man? Do you think he has Ryoko? Or is he bluffing?"

"I think he has Ryoko." Washu said quietly. "And I don't think he's bluffing. Clearly there's more at work here than a pirate with revenge on his mind. Whoever this man is, he seems to know who I am. That's always a worrying sign."

"You've never seen him before, Washu-san?" Yume asked, moving across towards them as she did so. "You've known a lot of people — are you sure you haven't met him at some point in your past?"

"I've met a good many people, most of whom are dead." Washu said succinctly. "But I think I'd remember this one. Did you notice his eyes, Tenchi? They were different colours, and the purple one glittered when he looked at you. It was like he saw right through you — right down to your soul and the Juraian spirit within you. I think I would remember one who looked like that."

"So, are we going after him?" Tenchi asked. Washu nodded.

"I am." She agreed. "I have no choice — even if it is a trap, it's our only lead."

"Then Yume and I are coming with you." Tenchi said firmly.

"Tenchi..."

"No arguments." Tenchi shook his head. "If it is a trap, Washu, you might need us. And besides, Yume and I want to find Ryoko too — it's not just you who's worried about her."

"I suppose that's fair." Washu acknowledged reluctantly. "But he said something about coordinates... I don't see any coordinates."

"Washu, look." Yume raised her hand in the direction of Ryo Ohki's navigation screen, and the cabbit let out a yowl as numbers and images flickered across the space map. "Ryo Ohki's picked up the signal... I guess he really did plan for every eventuality."

"This worries me more by the minute." Washu bit her lip. "He knows my name, he knew about Ryo Ohki and even how to send her a signal directly. Worse, he's not only taken Ryoko but he knew we'd come looking for her, and so prepared us with a little welcoming message. He's got this all planned out down to the last detail. We're

not dealing with a fool — we're dealing with someone extremely clever."

"I didn't see clearly from the back of the ship, but something about his voice bothered me." Yume admitted.

"Yume?" Tenchi shot the droid a confused look, and she smiled, shrugging her shoulders.

"I was out of range of his message, so I didn't get a clear look at his face." She continued. "But something resonated within me when I heard his voice. It's like I've heard it somewhere before... and what you said about his eye, too. I feel like I should know something — but I'm not sure why."

"So maybe *you've* met him before, Yume." Washu suggested. Yume shook her head.

"I don't know." She replied. "I don't see how. My digital memory is complete, after all, and comprehensive. It must just be my imagination. Forget it. It doesn't matter."

"Well, I suppose right now our priority is to do as he bids us and travel to this remote sector of his." Washu eyed Ryo Ohki's scanners with a heavy sigh. "All right, Ryo Ohki. Take it gently, and do your best. I know I'm not Ryoko, but do you think you can follow those numbers accurately?"

Ryo Ohki's answering yowl came as a comfort, and Washu smiled slightly.

"Atta girl." She said softly. "Then let's go get your mistress back."

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

“And where, exactly, are you going to?”

Ryoko shuffled herself into a more comfortable position, fidgeting against her restraints as she cast her captor an accusatory look. “Hey, are you listening to me? Stop ignoring my question and answer me — where are you going? Are you just going to leave me here, trussed up in your cables like some low flying bird caught in the power lines?”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

Zakari paused in his preparations, turning to cast her a quizzical look as he fastened the clasps of his cloak around his throat. “You’re not really in a position to ask me things like that, Ryoko. Sit tight, stay quiet, and wait for my return. I’m not going to abandon you here indefinitely. I just have something I must do, before we talk any more.”

“Something such as what?” Ryoko clenched her fists, pulling hard on the wires as she struggled to stand. “I thought you said you weren’t my enemy? Somehow you’re not doing a very convincing job of it, tying me up like this. Are you scared of what I’ll do to you? Is that it?”

“No, I’m not scared of you.” Zakari shook his head. “You’ve probably realised by now that I have a good amount of my own power and I’m capable of using it. Besides, you made this decision for yourself. I gave you the chance last night to help me, but you didn’t seem overly forthcoming. She still has control over you — so I’m not going to risk you interfering in my plans. Wait for me to come back. Then I will free you. I promise.”

“Back from where?” Ryoko’s eyes narrowed. “When you say ‘she’, are you still talking about Washu? How many times do I have to tell you, she doesn’t control me or anything I do!”

“You’re still talking.” Zakari observed absently, fidgeting with his boots as he did so. “Listen for a change instead. I know you’re upset with me and I understand that. It’s not nice to be tied up — I’ve experienced it myself, and I’m sorry I’ve had to do it to you. It wasn’t my intention. But you don’t understand what you’re saying. If I let you go now, there’s a good chance you might wind up getting hurt. And I don’t want to do that. You’re not the one I’m gunning for. It would be

a senseless waste.”

“A waste?” Ryoko echoed him. “A waste of what? Your energy? Your time? What is this ‘waste’ obsession of yours? And what, exactly, is so important about this little trip of yours that you can’t think about freeing me until you get back?”

Zakari offered her an opaque smile, coming to stand opposite her, and as he rested his hands on her shoulders, Ryoko was aware of the dull throb of energy that lurked beneath his fingers. She flinched back, but Zakari’s grip was firm, and she was unable to pull away.

“I’m going to kill Washu Hakubi.” He said quietly. “That’s all.”

“Kill... Washu?” Ryoko’s eyes widened with comprehension and disbelief as she stared up at him. “But why?”

“Why?” Zakari shook his head slowly. “You have to ask? Do you not understand what she’s done, Ryoko? What lines she crossed by bringing you into this world?”

“And so you’re going to kill her, because she has me for a daughter?” Ryoko demanded, wrenching his hands forcibly away from her body as she pulled hard on the taut, unrelenting cables. “Oh, damn your spider’s web! Let me out of here — I’ll knock some sense into you! What do you think you can achieve, taking Washu on? You’re insane! Completely insane! You can’t just go around killing people because they do something you don’t like!”

“I told you that I was the product of Dr Clay.” Zakari’s eyes glinted dangerously as he spoke the scientist’s name. “No doubt it was from his twisted sense of ego that I drew my own assumed name — he chose Kure for me when he let me go, as a throwback to where I really came from.”

“And that has what, exactly, to do with Washu?”

“You have really no idea, do you?” Zakari’s strange eyes darkened, and Ryoko saw glimmers of white light flare in their depths. “No comprehension of what that woman is guilty of.”

“No, obviously I don’t.” Ryoko snapped back. “But no matter what you think she’s done, you still aren’t her judge and jury, you know. Stop being so stupid, will you? I don’t care whether you hate my existence that much you’re willing to kill over it. But considering the fact you were created in exactly the same way, I would have thought you’d cut us both some slack! I thought you were on my side — why, then, are you looking to kill members of my family?”

“She is *not* your family!” Zakari’s temper flared up at this, eerie energy flickering all around him as he glared at her angrily, and despite herself Ryoko swallowed hard. “She is your creator! She is the one who committed the ultimate sin of playing God and decided to manipulate you into this world with no thought of your feelings or your needs for free life! I’m a scientist, Ryoko. I know how scientists can be — how passionate and absorbed they become in their own ideals until the world around them no longer has control over their wider ambitions. I know that Washu Hakubi is one of the dark souls flung out of the Science Academy for her subversive thoughts and dangerous designs. I know that she is not someone who can be trusted. She has already done enough — you are proof of that fact. You told me yourself that she worked with Dr Clay at the Academy and it is my belief that she worked with him beyond that, too. This technology that built us is the same — this interference in life and death! And even now, despite all of that, you try and defend her? And you say you have your own mind. Spare me. She controls you, just as if you were her puppet. If you are too blind to see it then I pity you. I am not so blind, and if you will not take vengeance for yourself, I will take it for you.”

“Vengeance...?” Ryoko blanched. “You really are mad! Maybe they were Academy alumni together, but Clay was responsible for Washu being banished the first time around, and he stole a lot of her work. Do you think she’d team up with him if she had a choice in the matter? She hated the man! Hated him!”

“Maybe I am mad.” Zakari said coldly. “But at least I’m not fooling myself. We scientists operate on a basis of proof. You and I are machines, Ryoko, no matter how much you seek to deny it. We’re other people’s projects. I know what that means better than you do, evidently. My memories were suppressed, but I remember clearly enough now. Do you know what else I discovered, when I started to dig out the truth about my past? All through my files was that woman’s name. Constant reference to Washu Hakubi. So don’t try and defend her to me. She is no innocent, and she is *not* your mother.”

“But it’s not possible!” Ryoko shook her head. “Washu hated Clay, I told you! She wouldn’t lower herself to his level. Don’t you understand that? At least give me some credit for knowing my own mother.”

“*Stop calling her that!*” Zakari exclaimed, leaning close enough for the pirate to feel his breath on her skin, and Ryoko glowered at him, drawing her hand awkwardly across his cheek as she sought to push him back.

"I'll call her what I like. I don't take orders from anyone, not you or her." She snapped. "Get that into your head, will you? I'm not anyone's slave. You're some crazy fanatic who needs to get a head check — you've let power go to your head and you're stark raving bonkers. And you expected me to help you? Give me a break."

"Until Washu is dead, Ryoko, you can never be free of her influence."

"Washu does not control me, will you listen for just one second?" Ryoko exploded, fury flaring in her golden eyes. "*I don't follow anyone's will except my own!*"

"And the Juraian Prince? What of him?" Zakari's demeanour changed suddenly, and Ryoko started, confused by his sudden change of tack. "What involvement has he in the dark schemes of the Professor, Ryoko? Is it true that Washu Hakubi's studies are tied in to Jurai's desires after all? I'd heard such a rumour — that your creation was tied in to that planet and their despotic former King. Is that Prince a fellow conspirator of Washu's? Should I eliminate him, also, in order to properly take my revenge?"

"Juraian prince?" Ryoko stared for a moment, then, "Do you mean Tenchi?"

"I don't know his name." Zakari shrugged dismissively. "But I sent a communication to your scientist, and he was there with her. He seemed just as keen to recover you as she did. Is this a bigger conspiracy than I thought? Are you shackled to Jurai as well as to Washu?"

"You dare lay a hand on him and I'll rip your heart out myself!" Ryoko threatened, fighting against her restraints once more. "He's nothing to do with you and you won't hurt him. Do you hear me? He's *nothing* to you!"

"I see." Zakari eyed her keenly. "You seem almost keen on him. Do you believe you love him, then?"

"I don't believe anything, and it's none of your business."

"Are you really so stupid as to believe anyone can love something created the way you and I were born?" Zakari asked her coldly. "Don't be naive. You are strong, Ryoko, but you are so very foolish. Now I understand how Washu has kept you so close to her side for so long. She's let you believe you truly are alive — even given you your whims and allowed you your pretend romance. The woman is more evil than I imagined... surely you understand that we can never have lives like

other people, because we are *not like* other people!”

“Of course we are. What else are we?” Ryoko glared at him. “I have two legs, two arms, one head — just the same as Washu and Tenchi do. Seems similar enough to me — I thought you said you were a scientist!”

“I’m also a realist.” Zakari said briefly. “For your sake, I will spare your Prince — at least, for the time being. But I’m beginning to relish more and more my chance to take vengeance on that awful excuse for a woman. The sooner I slay her, the better for the universe it will be.”

“And you really think that you’re going to be able to slaughter her? That she’s going to give up without a struggle?” Ryoko shot back. “You’re the one who doesn’t understand. Washu isn’t just some mad scientist, you idiot! She’s a Kii — she has the blood of the Priestesses and she can defend herself! She’s defeated demons before now — do you really think your weird magic is going to hold up against hers? You’re kidding yourself. If she’s as evil as you say, do you think she’d stop and spare your life so easily?”

“I don’t care.” Zakari cracked his knuckles. “You can’t dissuade me from my course, Ryoko.”

He turned, gesturing to the lab in which they both stood.

“This place was my home for a long time.” He murmured. “I have no childhood memories, only memories of this place, being locked up and studied day in and day out. Whether you’re willing to admit it or not, we’re lab rats. And I won’t stand for it any longer. So long as people like Washu Hakubi are alive, people like you and I are sub-human. We’re inferior creations — just other people’s whims. I’m going to restore the balance once and for all... and prove to the universe that people cannot be used as other people’s weapons!”

With that he was gone, disappearing in a bright flare of light, and Ryoko sank back against the lab wall, thoughts whirling through her head as she slid back down to the ground. Slowly she held up her arms, eying the tight cuffs with dislike.

“He’s really gone to kill Washu.” She murmured, her voice echoing softly around the empty chamber. “He’s mad, that’s for sure, but what about the things he says? I don’t know... he’s confusing. Does he really mean it, when he says he means me no harm? Does he really think he’s carrying out some kind of twisted revenge? Maybe he does.”

She sighed heavily, burying her head in her arms.

“Washu is strong, but insanity brings strength too, and I don’t know

which one of them is more nuts.” She said helplessly. “And I wish I was more certain that he was wrong — that Washu’s interest in me was more than just scientific, but in truth, I’ve had my doubts before. Still, either way, I don’t want him to go and kill her. That’s no solution to anything.”

She frowned, closing her eyes as she pictured her gentle home on the Earth.

“Earth isn’t designed to take an onslaught from a man such as him.” She whispered. “And Tenchi is there too — he might be hurt, if Zakari really is keen to challenge Washu head on. I know my fiance and I know he wouldn’t let her take this nutcase on alone... so what would happen then? Oh, stop torturing yourself, Ryoko! Without your magic, you can’t break free of this place, and you can’t call Ryo Ohki. You don’t even know where you are — where this place is that he’s brought you. It could be anywhere — one out of a million planets anywhere in the universe. Without my ship, I’ve no way to get back to the Earth anyway. I just hope they know what’s coming their way — and that they can somehow defend themselves and the Earth before he goes crazy on them like he did against me on the Moon!”

“Is this the place?”

Tenchi gazed down at the uneven, desolate landscape of the planetoid, pursing his lips as wispy clouds parted to reveal abandoned settlements and scarred, empty plains. Despite himself, she shivered involuntarily. “Do you think this is where Ryoko is? Somewhere on this rock?”

“Probably not.” Washu said grimly, coming to join him and resting a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I imagine that this Z person is too clever to bring her along. I’m pretty sure that he has other reasons for summoning us here, and that we’re going to have to be clever and out-think him if we’re going to get him to tell us where Ryoko is. We don’t really know what we’re dealing with yet, after all.”

“I’ve been to this world before.” Yume came to stand beside them. “It was once a military outpost for one of the big Imperial powers, but it was abandoned. Clay used to come here to take samples or do the occasional test. I remember coming here on a few occasions, when he had specific tasks to carry out.”

“Good, then maybe you can tell us the planet’s name?” Washu turned to eye her companion curiously. “The space map didn’t give one. Just a number.”

"I believe that is correct." Yume nodded her head. "As a military base only, it never had a name."

"When we say Imperial powers, are we talking about Jurai or Seniwa?" Tenchi asked softly. "Or some other Imperial power I don't know about?"

"Airai." Yume said pensively. "This planet was once governed by a powerful Daimyo family from that world. This was where the retinue trained... before Airai became less powerful and lost a good deal of its influence to the two you just mentioned."

"Airai was an Empire too, huh?" Tenchi looked startled.

"Yes. Airai was more than that — it was almost a religious revolution." Washu said thoughtfully. "Though just as with the Kii, it has been blacklisted in popular myth as a world of devil-worshippers and dark arts. I've met Arians before, and I know that there are many, many different cults of magic on that world. Their powerful elemental magic allowed them great influence, once upon a time. But of course, with the encroachment of Tsunami's Juraians and the ever more technological Seniwans, the lack of unity between the cults spoke for them in the end. They were just too divided to hold up against the onslaughts. I think many of their subjugated worlds broke free and many groups left en masse to form worlds and civilisations of their own, where they could practice their own beliefs without persecution. Thus places like this one were completely abandoned — there was no point in defending an Empire that was no longer there."

"I see." Tenchi frowned. "Do you think, then, that whoever has Ryoko has something to do with Airai?"

"It's possible." Yume agreed. "But I'm not sure. Clay liked to come here because it was quiet, remote and nobody else ever did. Few people care about what happens on a planet like this one, and nobody owns it now. So it's not exactly under anyone's criminal jurisdiction."

"Remote, abandoned, and perfect for a clandestine meeting between a kidnapper and his prey." Washu said darkly. Yume nodded.

"That was my thought, also." She admitted. "Another clever move from whoever is luring us into his web."

"Well, there's no point in dwelling on it." Washu sighed, glancing at her hands, then nodding. "I need to go down there. I don't know if he's here or not, or whether it's even safe to go down there. But I guess I shouldn't keep him waiting, if Ryoko's life might be dependant on it."

At this, Ryo Ohki gave a yowl, and Washu placed a gentle hand on the ship's frame.

"Far enough, my girl, far enough." She murmured. "You wait it out here. I know you're worried about Ryoko, but we can't risk anything else happening to you. Trust me to take care of this, all right? I'll do my best — you *do* trust me, don't you?"

There was an answering mew, and for a moment Washu glimpsed Ryo Ohki's animal appearance reflected in the crystals that hovered over the control panel. She smiled.

"Then I'm going." She said simply. "Yume, you and Tenchi stay here. Be prepared to move at a moment's notice — Ryo Ohki, you need to be on your guard also. We don't know how dangerous this is, so be aware, all right?"

"You think you should go down there alone?" Tenchi looked doubtful. "If it's a trap, you might get hurt. We already know this guy is powerful, Washu — and you're still training your Kii magic. Are you absolutely certain that it's the right thing to do?"

"I'll go alone." Washu nodded. "At least, to begin with. It's the best course of action open to us, until we know what this person is planning."

"Washu is right." Yume said softly. "She's by far the best person at keeping a cool head and if this is a negotiation, that's what we need. Besides, we'll be right here and Ryo Ohki will make sure we can see what goes on down there, won't you, Ryo Ohki? If things seem to be getting out of hand, Tenchi, I promise that I'll teleport the both of us down there. Noone is going to let Washu get hurt if it can be at all avoided."

"Thank you, Yume. It's good to know I have my back up in place." Washu flashed her a smile. "Wish me luck, then. Keep Ryo Ohki reassured, and try not to worry about me. I'll do my best to find out what I can about our mysterious kidnapper... I'm very much hoping he might lead us right back to Ryoko."

"Maybe if he has a ship moored somewhere nearby, we could track that down." Tenchi suggested. Washu shook her head, as Ryo Ohki mewed mournfully.

"Ryo Ohki has already scanned the surrounding area and picked up nothing." She said. "Her sensitivity is reduced at the moment, thanks to Ryoko's absence and the blast she took on the Moon, but even so I think she'd have located it, if such a ship was here. Of course, it may

well be cloaked, but it would take some cloaking device to fool Ryo Ohki."

"But if she's not a hundred percent..." Tenchi sighed. "I know. You're right. If Ryo Ohki can't find it, we won't have any luck either. It's just... I want to be doing something."

"I know you do." Washu eyed him fondly. "But just hang on here with Yume a while, okay? I may need to call on you, if things get nasty, and I need you on full alert."

"All right." Tenchi nodded. "But be careful, Washu. If he hurt Ryoko, and took Ryo Ohki off guard once, he might be waiting anywhere."

"I can be quite startling myself, at times." Washu winked at him. "I'll see you shortly."

With that she clenched her fists, closing her eyes and focusing her thoughts on the landscape below. For a moment the world blurred and twisted around her, but then she felt the soft, sandy dirt beneath her feet and she opened her eyes again, flexing her fingers warily as she glanced at her surroundings.

She was in the middle of an empty field, she realised, though any crops that had once been grown here had long since been abandoned. Thick bindweed grew across patches of the land, twisted together with thorns and creepers to create a strange, patchwork effect across the landscape. Bare earth intermingled the jaded greenery, and as she stepped cautiously between the spiked barbs and jagged flower-heads of surrounding plants, she frowned.

"Poisonous plants." She murmured. "But not poison to the Kii, thankfully. If Tenchi comes down here, I'll have to make sure he's careful. Some of these things could give him a nasty sting for a couple of days."

She raised her gaze, shielding her eyes from the blood red glare of the planet's low sun as she searched the horizon for any sign of company. There was none, however, and as a faint breeze whipped across the landscape, small clouds of sand and earth drifted around her, making the atmosphere hazy and indistinct. She frowned, narrowing her eyes.

"I'm not easily fooled by illusion, and it takes more than a planet with a sandstorm climate to phase me." She said clearly, in tones loud enough for anyone hiding in the surrounding area to hear her. "I've come, just as you instructed me. Now it's your turn to keep the

bargain, Z. I know you're here — I know you're listening to me. I'm sure you've been watching our every move, in one way or another. You wanted to speak to me so badly... well, here I am. Tell me what you've done with my daughter."

A flare of hot white light burst out from one of the nearby abandoned farm buildings, and Washu leapt backwards as it scorched through the earth, leaving a blackened trench in its wake as it burned its way through the rampant greenery. With fixed fascination, Washu watched how the plants caught in the glare shrivelled and dropped into nothing more than ash, and she found her mind drawn back to the strange, sweeping marks on the surface of the moon. As the light faded, she saw similar marks crossing the old military farm field, and she nodded her head slowly.

"You are here." She said quietly. "But you're too much of a coward to face me yourself."

"I'm not a coward, Washu Hakubi." At this, the form of a man flickered into view before her, touching carefully down amid the ash as he gazed at her coldly, folding his arms across his chest as he did so. "I was just testing you. Testing your reactions. Finding out whether you were of any threat to me — and whether you had come to this place armed or not."

"So you decided to test if I was armed by trying to kill me?" Washu arched an eyebrow. "That seems a little bit rash, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Perhaps." Zakari inclined his head slightly, offering her a frozen smile. "But I'm in something of a hurry, and I don't have time to waste on mind games."

"That makes two of us." Washu's expression hardened, and she glared at him, matching the iciness of his gaze with stone cold green eyes. "So enough with the pleasantries. You have something that belongs to me, and I want her back. Where is my daughter?"

"Something that belongs to you." Zakari's eyes narrowed to slits, and Washu was suddenly aware that she'd said something she should not have. "You dare call her your property and your daughter, in the same breath?"

"Where is she, Z. I want to know what you've done to her."

"I've freed her." Zakari said flatly. "Freed her from people like you, who consider her nothing more than an extension of your scientific achievement."

“Freed her?” Washu’s eyes widened, and light flared across her hands. “What do you mean, freed? If you’ve killed my girl...”

“Ryoko is not dead.” Zakari shook his head. “But she was kind enough to warn me that you were a witch, and that I should take special care when facing your demonic powers. I know a little about the Kii — very little, but enough to know that they practiced dark artistry of their own. Dr Clay was rather enamoured with the concept — so I’ve come prepared to meet you.”

“Clay?” Washu stared at him, the light flickering and dying from her fingertips as she digested his words. “This has something to do with Clay? But Clay is dead!”

“Yes, he is.” Zakari nodded. “Which is a shame, because there are things I’d have liked to have said to him.”

“Is that what this is about?” Washu frowned. “Are you a kinsman of Clay’s, looking for some kind of revenge? Because if you are, you should know that he died only of old age, not at anyone’s hand. Your quest is pointless, so you might as well let Ryoko go now.”

“This is not about revenge for Clay.” Zakari’s eyes glittered, and again Washu knew she’d said something to antagonise him. “I’m sorry for his passing only because it wasn’t me who took his life. But I still have you, Washu Hakubi. I brought you here so that I could face you, and look into the eyes of someone truly cold and evil. And then I am going to kill you, and free the universe of your dark presence forever.”

“I beg your pardon?” Washu stared at him, floored, and Zakari chuckled at her expression, nodding his head.

“You heard me.” He said softly. “I’ve come here to kill you, Professor.”

“Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I’m really not in the mood to die today.” Washu recovered herself, some of her usual flippance in her tone as a forcefield flared up around her body. “I’m not quite sure what Ryoko was doing, telling you about my magic, but she was right. I’m not completely without defences, and you’ll understand that I get a little annoyed when people meddle with my family. Ryoko’s a hotheaded, reckless creature on occasion, but I do take responsibility for her. So I’d quite like it if you’d give her back. Or at least tell me where to find her... I don’t really like resorting to violence.”

“Nor do I, but sometimes there’s justification.” Zakari lifted himself off the ground, his aura glowing with white light as he advanced on Washu’s forcefield. “And I doubt your feeble shield will keep me away

for long. I don't have time to waste, I told you."

"Won't you at least tell me why the homicidal rage?" Washu asked plaintively. "I mean, we've only just met. Isn't it a bit forward to kill a lady on our first acquaintance?"

Zakari faltered for a moment, and Washu offered him a winning smile.

"There, you see, personal space is important." She continued blithely. "And besides, I think you have made some kind of mistake. If you think I've done something to hurt you, well, I'm sorry for it. But I can't imagine what it would be. We've never met before — I'm pretty sure I'd remember someone as unique as you. You're not entirely horrible to look at, and you've got a fine physique. With those eyes, too — yes, I'd definitely remember a dashing stranger fitting your description. So all I can think is that this must have been a terrible misunderstanding. Shall we stop the power play for a moment, huh? Tell me what's wrong. It might be I can help."

Zakari stared at her for a moment, seemingly confused, and Washu eyed him keenly.

"You don't seem so very sure that you want to kill me." She added conversationally. "Maybe you're having second thoughts about it after all."

Zakari dropped his gaze to the ground, and for a moment there was silence. Then, very slowly, he lifted his eyes to hers and despite herself, Washu gasped, unnerved by the cold white energy flaring in his gaze.

"I have made no mistake." He said quietly, his every word seeming to reverberate as the power increased within him. "You are Professor Washu Hakubi. You created the science of forming a living being from the genetic material of others, to serve your own selfish purpose. You moulded your devil caller Ryoko in just this way, and you conspired with Dr Clay in order to bring me into this world. You underestimate the intelligence of your so-called puppets, and our ability to think and feel for ourselves. Ryoko hasn't the guts to kill you herself — and she lacks the conviction to break free of your hold without help. But I am sworn to avenge myself on all of you — you scientists who think to play God. Clay is gone, and you will soon join him. There will be no more experiments... and no more enslavements. Not from the likes of you."

Before Washu could react, energy pulsed out from around his body, searing once more across the earth as it engulfed her shield in it's

glare, burning against it with hot, persistent crackles of light. Despite herself, Washu found that she could not hold her forcefield up against the strength of his wave, and as she flickered out of view, re-materialising some feet away, she registered with a growing sense of alarm the magnitude of his magic.

“This is beyond strong. This is out of his control.” She murmured, as Zakari wheeled on her, preparing to send out another like flare. “He might be choosing to attack me, but he hasn’t got full control of his abilities, and he might yet obliterate the whole planet if we let him continue like this. But how can I hold him off? He’s not a demon, like Yugi was. I can’t exorcise something that isn’t there. And anything else I can do might be useless against him. I need to keep up my shield, or else he’ll burn me for sure — but *can* I? The heat is intense and it prickles against my fingers so much. I’m not sure if I can keep my concentration if he carries on this kind of onslaught for long! Damn Clay! If he’s speaking the truth, I might have known that man would do an inferior job. Now I suppose I know why he had so much interest in my files on Ryoko... and more to the point, it looks like he got a hold of more than I thought, back before I erased the records from my computer’s system!”

At that moment, a fresh flare of light made contact with the edges of her shield and she closed her eyes, forcing all her strength into maintaining the divide between her magic and his. Fatigue had begun to wash over her, as she pushed more and more of her energy into thwarting his attack, and she realised with a sudden jolt that she no longer had the strength to teleport out of his range.

“I can’t make it back to Ryo Ohki.” She whispered, screwing up her eyes as beads of perspiration began to form on her brow. “It’s so... hot. I can’t... hold this forever. Damn it! I can’t let him kill me, on account of something that idiot Clay once did!”

“*Washu!*”

The sound of Tenchi’s voice jerked her out of her thoughts and she opened her eyes, suddenly aware that the oppressive wave of heat had dissipated. As her forcefield flickered and disintegrated, she became aware that something had come between her and her assailant, and that three ghostly white blades had spread out across the landscape.

“The Light Hawk Wings.” She whispered, as she dropped to her knees, taking a deep breath of air into her lungs. “*Tenchi.*”

“What are you doing!” Zakari exclaimed, agitation clear in his expression as he sent volley after volley in the direction of the young

Prince's shield, as if attempting to reach Washu through it's protective surface. "Why are you standing in my way? Step aside! Nothing can withstand my magic for long — you'll only get hurt and I promised her I wouldn't hurt you!"

"Promised who?" Tenchi demanded, determination in his expression as he brought his arms out, doubling the strength of the blades as he did so. "Promised Ryoko? What have you done with her? Where is she?"

Zakari cursed, lowering his hands as he took a faltering step back from the spectral light surrounding Tenchi and his companions. Washu saw a strange look of desperation cross his features as he stumbled, falling to the ground as the white aura that surrounded him flickered and died.

"Now maybe you'll tell us where Ryoko is, since you can't fight any more." Out of the corner of her eye, Washu saw Yume dart forward, and a look of confusion and alarm darted across Zakari's unusual eyes.

"Zero?" He whispered. Yume stopped dead at the sound of her real name, staring at him in surprise.

"What did you call me?"

Zakari gazed at the droid hopelessly for a moment. Then he closed his eyes, fading and disappearing from the landscape completely.

"Where did he go?" Tenchi rushed forward, his shield shattering into shards of light as his concentration broke. "Yume, did you see? Which way did he go?"

"He just... he vanished, Tenchi." Yume turned, a look of consternation on her face. "I'm sorry, I should have stopped him. But he said something that startled me."

"He called you Zero." Washu struggled to her feet, and Tenchi held out his hand to her, supporting her as she steadied herself. "Thank you, both of you. Especially you, Tenchi. He was stronger than I imagined he'd be — dangerously so. You could have been in a lot of danger — thank you for protecting me."

"Of course." Tenchi told her quietly. "You're almost as much my family as Ryoko's, now. Or you will be, when we..."

He faltered, hesitating for a moment, and Washu knew he was dwelling on the uncertainty of his fiancée's fate. She squeezed his hand.

"I believe Ryoko is definitely alive." She said softly. "And also,

something else very interesting. When you stood between us, Tenchi, his animosity towards me didn't change at all. But he seemed quite upset that you were there. You heard what he said. He'd promised someone not to hurt you."

"Yes. I think he meant Ryoko." Tenchi nodded his head. "Which means she probably is still alive. But the question is, where?"

"And how much is Ryoko involved herself?" Washu asked darkly, gazing up at the sky. Tenchi stared at her.

"What do you mean? That's crazy!"

"Is it?" Washu turned to face him, a strange look in her green eyes. "Before you intervened, he said something else to me that struck me as odd. He mentioned that Ryoko had told him I was a witch. Had warned him about my magic. Then we discover that he'd promised her not to cause you harm. Yet it was me she went off in a rage at, when she vanished the other night. I don't like the possible connection, but it has to be considered."

"No way." Tenchi said adamantly. "Maybe she did tell him about your magic, and maybe he did promise not to hurt me. But Ryoko has her limits, no matter how mad you might make her, Washu. She's not the kind of person to endorse killing anyone, you know that."

"How did he know that I was Zero?" Yume turned at that moment, fixing them both with a troubled look. "Noone has called me that for a long time. Did Ryoko also tell him about me?"

"Perhaps he has truth serum. That might explain all of those things." Tenchi suggested. Washu shook her head, narrowing her eyes.

"No, it wasn't that." She said pensively. "Yume, when he looked at you, his expression changed. He *recognised* you. It wasn't anything that anyone told him that brought that look to his face. It was seeing you, right there, standing before him. And another thing... before you came, he claimed to be a product of Clay's science. That Clay had attempted to repeat my experiment with Ryoko, and had created him as a result. This Z person is Clay's creation, and the fact that he recognises you tells me that he once knew you."

"But I don't remember him." Yume protested. "So that doesn't work."

"You did say there was something familiar about his voice." Tenchi remembered, as the droid gripped his hand and Washu's tightly in her own, focusing her energy on the hovering spaceship that still waited above the clouds. "Didn't you?"

“Yes, but I couldn’t reference the memory in my databanks.” Yume shook her head, as they re-materialised in Ryo Ohki’s drive-room, Washu sinking down against the control panel with a sigh as they did so. “Washu, are you all right? You look exhausted.”

“I am exhausted, but thanks to Tsunami’s magic, I’m alive.” Washu assured her. “And I’ll recover quickly. But he really did push me to my limit.”

“So if he knew Yume, and was a creation of Clay’s, why doesn’t Yume remember?” Tenchi asked, leaning up against the navigation screen. “That makes no sense.”

“Zero was a robot who followed key programmed instructions, whatever Yume has become.” Washu shook her head. “If there are faint traces of a memory, it’s only because Yume’s mind has achieved a high level of sophistication since Tokimi meddled with her programming and gave her human emotions. But the files themselves were probably removed by Clay... or at the very least, archived to the darkest recesses of her memory.”

“Do you think there’s any chance of drawing them out?” Yume asked hesitantly. “If they had been completely erased, Washu, I would have no lingering memory of anything. As you said, I was Zero then. Anything erased at that time would have been gone entirely. But it’s possible he archived the information, in case he might need it at a later date. I was his computer system, after all. I kept track of everything. It might be that one day he’d want to reopen the file. And if Tokimi’s flare of magic broke down the barrier between my emotions and my data drives, then it’s possible it also broke the seal on anything he’d locked away within me. Only it wouldn’t have occurred to me to look, until something like this teased out some stray information.”

“All right. Then that’s what we’ll do next, when we return to the Earth.” Washu said decidedly, reaching out a hand to touch Ryo Ohki’s hovering crystals. “Can you take us home, Ryo Ohki? As fast as you can, please. I don’t know where this Z person has gone to, but we don’t know if he might launch another attack. And I’d rather not be on the Earth if he chooses to track us there.”

“And Ryoko?” Tenchi cast a glance back towards the planet, even as with a combative yowl Ryo Ohki launched herself further and further away from it’s surface. “Without catching that guy, how will we find out where she is?”

“Hopefully there’ll be a clue in Yume’s memory to how all of this

came about.” Washu replied. “Enough of one that will lead us right to where he’s keeping her.”

“You don’t really think she’s complicit in this, do you Washu?” Tenchi asked doubtfully. Washu sighed.

“I don’t know.” She said uneasily. “I’m not sure she’d kill me — well, in truth, Z told me that she didn’t have the nerve to kill me or break free of me without help. But she was nursing a grudge, the night she left home. It’s possible someone has taken advantage of her unstable emotional state and convinced her that I’m more her inventor than her mother.”

“She does wonder, sometimes.” Tenchi acknowledged. “This is what I was talking about, when I called you on your fighting. Protecting yourself is one thing, but Washu, Ryoko really doesn’t know where she stands with you some days. And she doesn’t say it, not always, but I know it eats away at her.”

“This guy is resentful because Clay created him in a laboratory, and probably planned to use him for some evil scheme of his own.” Washu said quietly. “But I suppose on reflection, Ryoko has the same axe to grind as he does. After all, I created her to battle Kagato and bring him down. She was born of my own selfish desires for revenge. Perhaps Z was right. Maybe I am cold, dark and evil, when you look at it in that light.”

She sighed, placing her hands on Ryo Ohki’s control panel as the ship let out a sympathetic whimper.

“I know, Ryo Ohki. Sometimes you understand better than Ryoko does, I think.” She said reflectively. “Maybe it’s because when I first told you who you were, you took snippets of my memories while I glimpsed at yours.”

“But you created Ryoko to fight Kagato. Kagato was a threat to the universe — your foresight was proven accurate.” Tenchi said with a frown. “Okay, I’m not sure how I feel about how it all happened, but at the end of the day, your intention was good. I mean, you did want to bring Kagato down, didn’t you? You did want to save the universe from falling under his spell? Because Ryoko existed, I was drawn into the whole Juraian thing. If I’d not met her, I never would have travelled interstellar. And Ryoko and I laid Kagato to rest for good. So you were right. It all worked out.”

“It makes me sound so very noble.” Washu agreed pensively. “I’m such a good liar that sometimes I believe it myself.”

“Washu?” Tenchi stared at her, and Washu offered him a rueful smile.

“It’s not a whole lie. I did know Kagato would prove a threat to more than just myself, when I decided to create Ryoko.” She said flippantly. “But my motives weren’t quite so selfless. I wanted revenge on him, true enough. But it wasn’t really because of universal peril. It was far more personal than that.”

“In what respect?” Tenchi frowned, and Yume crossed the drive room floor, resting a hand on Washu’s arm.

“Kagato killed someone she loved.” She said softly. “And Washu couldn’t forgive him.”

Tenchi’s expression softened.

“The person you lost.” He murmured. “The one you hinted at briefly, when I told you I’d proposed to Ryoko. The man Sasami said you’d had in the past. That’s who she meant, isn’t it?”

Washu nodded her head.

“But there’s no sense in dwelling on it now.” She added. “I need a clear head if we’re going to get home, and so I’d rather not dig any deeper into that memory. I just wonder, I suppose, if I let my own selfish desires sway me into making the decisions I did back then. I wasn’t entirely thinking rationally, it has to be said. And well, I had wanted a family with Mikamo so badly... perhaps that’s the real reason I did it. Maybe I just wanted to know I’d be a mother, even if everything else was gone.”

She faltered for a moment, closing her eyes as she regained control of her emotions. Then she turned, offering Tenchi a faint smile.

“We’ll go home and sift through Yume’s memory banks, see what we can discover.” She added. “No sense in doing anything else... and hopefully this Z person has told us enough for us to map a path to wherever it is he’s keeping Ryoko.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

It was getting dark in the cool, Heiwan laboratory by the time Zakari returned. Curled up in her corner, Ryoko had sunk into sleep, even the discomfort of her persistent shackles giving way at long last to her tiredness. She did not know how long she had slept for, but at the sound of a loud clatter she was immediately alert, jerking her head up and wincing involuntarily as the sharp, taut wires cut into her skin.

“Damn him!” She muttered, examining her arm with a grimace as she noticed the fresh red mark across her skin. “And he thinks he’s doing me a favour? I’ve got to get myself free of this somehow. He needs some serious sense kicked into him — but how am I meant to do that without my magic? I’m strong, but I’m not that strong!”

Before she could assess her situation any further, the door of the laboratory slid open and Ryoko tensed, glaring up towards her captor as he entered the room. Her sharp greeting died on her lips, however, as the man stumbled into the chamber, not even seeming to see her as he dropped to the floor, leaning up against the wall as if in need of support just to keep himself upright. His body was trembling slightly, beads of sweat coursing his brow, and his skin was an unearthly shade of grey. Ryoko bit her lip, eying him uncertainly. For a moment, silence reigned, then, at length, she could bear it no more.

“I warned you that Washu wasn’t someone to mess with.” She said frankly. “Bet you wish you’d listened to me, now.”

Zakari did not answer, and Ryoko frowned, narrowing her eyes.

“Look, if you’re going to die, I’d rather you did it somewhere else. I’m not that keen on spending my time here with a corpse, and you could at least be considerate enough to release me first.” She added. At this Zakari’s eyes flickered open, and with some effort he raised his head to hers, a dull emptiness in his odd coloured gaze.

“I’m not going to die.” He murmured hoarsely, struggling into a more upright position. “At least, not yet. Not... not this time.”

“Not this time?” Ryoko stared at him, taken aback. “Not this time, but some time?”

“I would have thought that was obvious.” Zakari took a shuddering

breath into his lungs. “We’re all going to die sometime, Ryoko. Didn’t your *mother* ever teach you that?”

“I’ve faced death down plenty of times. Don’t be patronising.” Ryoko bristled. “From the looks of you, my mother taught you a few things today, also. I did tell you not to fight her. You really should have trusted me on that. Washu isn’t your average scientist.”

“Washu is strong, but I would have slain her.” Zakari said quietly. “There was interference. Your Prince intervened... so I had to withdraw.”

“Tenchi.” Ryoko’s eyes flickered with relief. “Can’t say I’m surprised. But you didn’t hurt him, did you? I mean, if you did...”

“I didn’t hurt him.” Zakari shook his head, slowly and painfully. “I promised you I wouldn’t, didn’t I?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“I keep telling you I’m not your enemy.” Zakari said hollowly. “Will you believe me now?”

“You have me tied up, and you tried to kill my mother.” Ryoko said acidly. “So far you’re not doing well at gaining points.”

“I didn’t have a choice.” Zakari shook his head in frustration. “I had to restrain you and I’m sorry that I did. But I couldn’t keep fighting you. I don’t have that kind of energy... I can only do this so many times before it consumes me completely.”

“What?” Ryoko’s eyes opened wide with shock at this. “You mean you seriously are dying? I mean... I mean soon? For real?”

Zakari nodded.

“With power as strong as mine, there is a price.” He said weakly. “Clay designed me to be powerful, but he didn’t know what he was doing. He went too far — he advanced my development too many steps and in the end, he asked too much of my body. The magic it contains is stronger than it is — and as time goes on, the magic wears my cells down faster than I can repair them. That’s why he discarded me, in the end. I was unstable. I was a failed experiment. So he wiped my memory, gave me the false name Zakari Kure and cut me loose, inflicting me and this destructive, dangerous energy on some unsuspecting world as he moved on to other things. I was just a machine gone wrong to him. A mistake. Nothing more.”

Ryoko stared at him for a moment, then she frowned.

“That sucks.” She said softly. “No wonder you’re so messed up.”

“Well, now you understand why I’m so pressed for time.” Zakari hauled himself up, but his legs buckled beneath him and he flung out his hands, grabbing desperately at Ryoko’s restraints as he struggled to prevent himself from falling headlong. “When my magic surges, it surges, and little can stand in its way. But when it dies, I have no energy at all. It took every remaining ounce of my strength to get back here. Science is a truly evil thing, Ryoko, when you realise it’s become more than just your vocation. It will be the end of me, also. And I want to prevent anyone else from suffering in the same way.”

“That’s why you kidnapped me.” Ryoko looked pensive. “But I’m not exactly like you, you know. I mean, I really have lived my own life. Whatever purpose Washu created me for, it all went wrong when I was about two or three years old. I didn’t discover my true origins or what she had planned for me until a year or so ago — and up till recently I’d barely even known who Washu was. She was imprisoned in a rock, and I was a Space Pirate, making my own rules and my own decisions. So we’re not exactly the same. Not really.”

Zakari sighed.

“Washu’s name is mentioned in Clay’s files referring to me.” He said softly. “And Clay’s droid Zero is in Washu’s company. What other conclusion can I draw? Washu must have known about me, and even been involved in my creation. You don’t realise, Ryoko, that before he cut me loose, I was a prisoner of this lab. That’s no exaggeration. I was fed only when he felt it necessary, and put through rigorous tests day after day. I don’t even remember being a child. All I can picture is the same routine, each and every day. Being here, undergoing his work, and then being fastened up in shackles at night, to prevent me from escaping.”

Ryoko ran her fingers absently over the cuffs, then she glanced at him.

“With these.” She said softly. “In the same way you’ve now restrained me.”

Zakari’s eyes became clouded, and he nodded his head.

“Yes.” He admitted. “In exactly that way. I’m sorry, Ryoko, for making you a prisoner.”

“Well, you could always un-make me one.” Ryoko held out her hands. “If you really are sorry, you could undo my cuffs and remove these horrible things.”

“And then what would you do?” Zakari demanded faintly. “Fly to your Earth and bring back the witch and your Prince here to finish the job? To study me, like I was studied before? Or would you finish me yourself, so that I couldn’t try again when your back is turned? I don’t think it would be wise. I need to regather my strength, and I need to take care of Washu. I must. It’s the only thing I can do, to prevent this from happening to anyone else.”

Ryoko eyed him pensively for a moment. Then she shook her head.

“I’m not going to fight you again.” She said firmly. “If you’re that unstable, I’m not going to be the one who kills you. Killing isn’t something I do. I’ve never taken a life yet, and I don’t plan on starting now. But you’re being insane. You’re pushing yourself closer and closer to your own death by forcing this much energy out of you, just to take some revenge that doesn’t even need to be taken.”

“Do you really think that I don’t need to have revenge?” Zakari demanded. “After all I’ve been through, do you really think that’s the case?”

“I think you should let me go.” Ryoko said quietly. “And then, if you want, we’ll talk. But I’m saying nothing else to you until you release these cuffs. They’re digging into me, and if you know how bad it feels, you shouldn’t stoop to Clay’s level and imitate his manner of restraint.”

Zakari stared at her for a moment, horror flickering in the depths of his eyes, and Ryoko knew she had hit a nerve. For a moment she wondered if she had gone too far, but then her companion fumbled in the folds of his cloak for his small black device, reaching out to take her by the hand as he ran the box over the silver cuff. With a click, it fell free, clattering to the floor and as Zakari repeated the gesture with the second bracelet, the sharp metal cords pulled back from Ryoko’s body, disappearing back into the walls as the pirate rubbed her wrists gratefully, casting him a smile.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” She said simply, gripping him tightly by the arms. “And now I’m free of that, you’re coming somewhere with me.”

“Ryoko!” Zakari’s eyes opened wide with fear, but Ryoko laughed, flickering them both out of view and re-materialising across the far side of the lab, where Zakari’s pallet bed lay empty and abandoned in a corner. She dropped him down on top of it, and he stared up at her in confusion, disorientated and bewildered by her actions.

“You’re *helping* me?” He whispered. “I don’t understand. I thought

you didn't want to help me. I thought..."

"Well, I'm not crazy about your politics." Ryoko squatted on the end of the bed, awkwardness in her expression as she rested her chin in her hands. "And I'm no one's nursemaid. But you look like death, and I don't want a corpse on my hands. If you are going to die, you're not doing it on my watch, all right? You wanted to talk to me and I'm game to try and talk sense into you, also. But this whole power surge thing is insane. You have to stop it, else you're going to burn out sooner than you think."

"I probably don't have a choice." Zakari admitted with a heavy sigh, settling back on his pillows and resting his hands beneath his head as he regarded her. "I don't have much control, I told you. It comes when I'm angry, true enough, but sometimes it just creeps up on me unawares. I'm volatile to be around, which is probably why Clay kept me cuffed so much when I was in the lab. He didn't want me exploding into light and damaging his precious equipment."

Bitterness touched his expression, and Ryoko sighed.

"But you had a life, right?" She asked doubtfully. "You said that you were once Zakari Kure, and that you were a scientist. So that was real, wasn't it? I mean, it was outside of these walls."

"Yes, it was." Zakari inclined his head slightly. "I worked in a research facility, not so very far from where we are."

"Which is...?"

"If I tell you that, you'll be gone by the time morning comes." Zakari shook his head. "That's the only reason you're still here, Ryoko. I know that. You don't know where you are, so you're not able to leave."

"I don't follow anyone's instructions. I'll leave when I'm ready, whether I know where I am or not." Ryoko made herself more comfortable. "But right now, we're having this conversation and I intend to finish it. Your homicidal thoughts are going to kill you, and I'm no scientist, but if the attack you launched on me is anything to go by, if you implode yourself you might well implode this lab and the whole rest of the planet, too. That's not really on my to do list, being blown up with some planet I don't even know."

She eyed him keenly, absorbing his expression.

"Well? Was it really so bad, being Zakari Kure?"

"No." Zakari shook his head. "I didn't have any memories of my life

before I left this lab, of course, and I wanted to find those answers — fill in the gaps. But it was all right, to begin with.”

He sighed.

“Then I began to get headaches, and dizzy spells.” He remembered sadly. “I’d wake up in cold sweats and I’d feel prickles all through my skin — like pins and needles, only they didn’t go away so easily. To start with, I just ignored them. But they became stronger and they began to interfere in my work and my life.”

He bit his lip, shaking his head as if to clear it, and Ryoko watched him like a hawk, taking in the mixture of expressions that flitted through his eyes.

“The last time, I lost control completely.” He murmured. “I destroyed the lab in which I was working, and... and someone I cared about was hurt. Badly hurt. I... I don’t even know if she’s survived, because I couldn’t go back, or risk seeing her. I’ve lost control so many times that I can’t risk causing her or anyone else more harm. And the more the impulses came, the more I remembered about this life. Eventually I had no choice but to face what I was. And so I came here, and dug it all out. The truth, about who I really was.”

Ryoko pursed her lips, digesting this slowly.

“So this is all about a woman.” She said at length. “Is that right? You flared up, she got caught in the crossfire and you blame yourself. Am I right?”

“In some respects, I suppose so.”

“Then what was all of that rubbish you threw at me about imagining I loved Tenchi?” Ryoko raised an eyebrow. “Clearly you’re in love with this girl, so clearly you’re a complete hypocrite.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t love him. I said that noone could begin to love what we were.” Zakari corrected her morosely. “And it’s true, you know. I put her life at risk — I almost killed her. Maybe I damaged her forever... maybe I have killed her, I don’t know. But at the very least I betrayed her trust in me by putting her in a position of such danger. I am a monster and I should die — I’ve resigned myself to that fate. But I’m determined to put an end to this whole thing before I do. To stop any more projects from being created — to stop other fake lives from beginning.”

“And I’m going to call you on the hypocrisy thing again, because one moment you’re fretting about almost killing this woman and the next you’re alluding to slaughtering my mother.” Ryoko said bluntly.

“You don’t want people to think we’re monsters or inferior or any of those things. Yet you’re willing to kill someone who probably has nothing to do with your creation anyway. Does that sound sane and rational to you? Science is supposed to be logical. You’re not a bit logical. Even I can pick open the holes in your argument. They’re big enough that even Ryo Ohki could burrow through them without getting her ears caught.”

“You don’t know that Washu is not involved. Your latent loyalty to her is making you blind.”

“You don’t know that she was.” Ryoko countered.

“But I do know she created you, and I do know that her purpose in doing so wasn’t to play happy families.” Zakari snapped. “However you look at it, your logic is just as flawed.”

“Maybe.” Ryoko said slowly. “But you don’t know Washu, and I do. Take my word for it, the woman is fanatical about her science. Maniacally so. Do you think she’d have settled for your inferior cell structure, if she’d had anything to do with it at all? You said I was mentioned in the files Clay left behind. Well, that means I was born before you were, doesn’t it? Even though I look young, striking and beautiful, I’m probably a fair few years older than you — just by your own testimony. Does it make sense, Mr Scientist, that she would create a stable being first, and then an unstable one second? Get real. Plus, Washu wouldn’t have discarded you so easily. She built weapons to destroy the universe and she still has many of them, even though they got her seven Earth centuries of imprisonment in a Shinto cave. She doesn’t throw away the things she creates. If she’d built you, she’d still be working on a remedy to fix your broken cells. You were Clay’s bad science... but I highly doubt you were Washu’s.”

“And what about Zero? You can’t deny that she’s the Professor’s familiar now... and I remember her carrying out test after test on me, without flinching, on Clay’s say so.”

“You mean Yume.” Ryoko grimaced. “I have no clue, honestly, why she still hangs around the house. But she’s been reprogrammed since Clay was removed from the equation. She’s a damn good cook, even if she is a little bit weird. She’s not really Zero any more. I mean, for one thing, the stupid droid has a crush on my Tenchi. I very much doubt she’s the same robot you knew. Even if she was involved in Clay’s work with you, her data drives got blasted by hippy Kii magic. Totally blew her sanity chip — she probably doesn’t even remember you at all.”

“Re..programmed?” Zakari stared at her blankly, and Ryoko nodded.

“You see now?” She said flippantly. “Your one man crusade to blow up Washu or die in the attempt isn’t really all that clever at all, is it? You say you work on proof, but you really don’t seem to have much.”

“Ryoko, tell me something.” Zakari hauled himself up into a sitting position, eying her quizzically.

“Mm?”

“Why do you defend her so much, if you truly aren’t under the woman’s control?”

“Washu?” Ryoko looked startled. Zakari nodded.

“Yes. Don’t you ever get angry with her? I mean, when you first found out what she’d done, can you tell me you weren’t mad at her?”

A rueful smile touched Ryoko’s lips, and she nodded.

“I’ve had my fair share of getting mad at her.” She agreed. “Many times, if you want to know. And some of the things you’ve said... they have resonated with me more than they should have, if I’m honest. I don’t always know how she views me. I’m not sure if I’m her daughter or her science project these days — she’s so hard to read. Sometimes I think it would be safer not to know, but then I realise it doesn’t actually matter all that much. It’s just... well, I’d prefer her to be my mother than my creator. And I’d like to think she thought of it that way, too. But as for my development, my upbringing... all of those things she had nothing to do with. I really wasn’t influenced by her at all when I was younger. My childhood was pretty wild, and so has my adulthood been so far. But I’ve made pretty much all the decisions. And there aren’t very many of them I regret.”

“You truly are a pirate, then?”

“Yes, or I was. Once. Before I met Tenchi and decided to stay with him on the Earth.” Ryoko reflected. “Because that’s something else you’re wrong about. Tenchi knows everything about me — he has done as long as I have, really. Everything I’ve found out, he’s been there when I discovered it, and still he’s stood by me. It doesn’t bother him, how I came to be born.”

Zakari sighed, rubbing his temples.

“I’m confused.” He admitted. “And it doesn’t help, with all of this buzzing through my brain. I’m so tired, and I don’t know what I think.”

“I’m not sure you’re really the mass-slaughtering type, are you, Zakari?” Ryoko asked softly. Zakari stared at her, then he shrugged.

“I’m running out of time.” He said quietly. “And I’ve not been as lucky as you. I’ve not had much time to forge my own life, and my own identity. I think it runs deeper inside me, being someone’s puppet. I can’t forgive as easily as you can.”

“It’s not a case of forgiving.” Ryoko got to her feet, moving absently across the chamber towards the discarded cuffs. Carefully she scooped them up, running her fingers over them and then setting them down on a nearby empty unit. “It’s a case of living for me, and not worrying about what she or anyone else wants. At the end of the day, it’s not how you get here that counts. It’s what you do when you are here. I defy anyone to say they’ve got more out of life than I have, and I have a whole lot more to do yet. I’ve been all over the universe, I’ve seen, stolen, raided, explored. I’ve raced comets, flown through meteor storms, and spent the night in a palace shaped like a tree. I’ve been hunted by police and bounty hunters, and I’ve been the guest of an Imperial family.”

Her gaze softened.

“I’ve fallen in love, and learnt what it means to have that returned.” She added gently. “And my next adventure will be life with Tenchi, back on the Earth. All of those things... do you still think I’m not really alive, when you know all of that?”

“Perhaps.” Zakari pursed his lips, and Ryoko could see there was still reticence in his eyes. He sighed. “But I’m too tired to discuss this further. It’s late, and I need to conserve my strength.”

He eyed her doubtfully.

“I won’t be surprised, if you’re gone when I wake.” He added. “It’s not necessarily safe to spend too much time around me — you might prefer to take your chances in space, even if you don’t know where you are.”

“I’m not really looking to freeze my butt off in some strange land when I’ve got a roof over my head here.” Ryoko said flippantly. “I’m not going anywhere just yet. Besides, someone’s got to keep an eye on you. If you’re off on homicidal rampages, I can’t just take off and leave you to your own devices. If I did, and you went nuts and killed someone, well, it’d be my fault and I’ve got this far without anyone’s blood on my conscience. I’d like to keep that record intact.”

“Whatever you want.” Zakari closed his eyes. “You really weren’t

much of an assassin for Washu, were you?"

"Nope, and it's one of the things I'm most proud of." Ryoko said firmly. "It's more of a challenge to succeed as a pirate without slitting any throats, which is why I was the best pirate the universe has ever seen."

"Plus, it's a way of avoiding your destiny." Zakari's voice was becoming blurry, as his tiredness began to overtake him. "Refusing to be Washu's assassin by refusing to kill."

With that he was asleep and Ryoko sighed, gazing down at him pensively for a moment.

"Well, what now?" She murmured, lifting her wrists to examine the red marks that still lingered. "So he abducted me and tied me up and tried to kill Washu. Why do I want to help him, then? Why am I sticking around, really? I guess maybe it's because we do have something in common. And well, he's a bigger threat to himself than he is to me right now. If he's telling the truth, and he really is dying, then he probably won't survive another encounter with my mother. And even if he did, well, the Earth might not stand it. From what he said, it sounded like he withdrew when Tenchi got involved. So he meant what he said, when he said he wouldn't hurt my fiancée. If he did go to the Earth to find them, it doesn't sound like he did much damage while he was there. A second visit might be different, however... and I can't risk anything bad happening to that world. It's my home, after all. It's where Tenchi and I are going to spend our life together, so I can't let Zakari go and blow it up."

She cast her captor one final glance, lifting one of the discarded blankets that lay tossed up against the wall and draping it carefully over his body. He did not stir, lost in his exhausted stupor, and at length she turned her back on him, scooping up the second blanket and pausing to eye her surroundings. A slight smile touched her lips as she lifted herself upwards, settling herself atop one of the big steel cabinets and wrapping herself in the worn, moth-eaten fabric as she made herself comfortable.

"Good thing for me I'm not fussy about where I sleep." She told herself wryly. "So long as it's somewhere with a view, I'm not complaining. Plus, if he tries to leave, I'll probably hear him, sleeping here. All those years sleeping with an ear open for Haki will pay off tonight, that's for sure — Zakari isn't going to take a potshot at anyone else if I can help it."

She closed her eyes, hesitating for a moment, then inwardly making

up her mind. Cautiously she reached out her thoughts to her spaceship, straining to find Ryo Ohki's brainwave patterns in their usual location in the depths of her mind.

"Maybe I'm too far away, or maybe the effects of the cuffs have still blocked me, but I'll keep trying." She decided. "I don't know where I am, but if I can contact her, maybe she can figure it out and tell the others. And at the very least then Tenchi will know I'm safe."

"So, what exactly have we discovered?"

Tenchi settled himself down on the living room floor, placing his empty soup bowl on the table as he eyed his companions expectantly. "You've both spent the whole night locked away in the lab, so you must have discovered something. Surely? Washu, did you manage to find the missing files in Yume's memory? Or are we still at square one?"

"I'd say at least square three or four." Washu set down her chopsticks, stretching her hands over her head as she stifled a yawn. "I have to hand it to you, Yume-chan. Even when you're tired, you still make a mean breakfast."

Yume offered her a smile.

"I'm not so easily tired as that." She said simply. "As for Ryoko, Tenchi, there's nothing clear-cut in my memories to suggest where she might be now. But there is some information relating to something called 'Project Z'."

"Project Z?" Tenchi stared. "Isn't Z what this madman is calling himself?"

"Yes." Washu confirmed. "And Z is just an abbreviation. The Project's actual name — or should I say, catalogue number — is Z-0001332536893, and it is one of several half-files within Yume's digital drives that relate to cloning attempts on Clay's part. Apparently, it took him a lot of tries — and this was the sole file which reaped any kind of success."

"So he was a creation of Clay's." Tenchi pursed his lips. "That was true."

"It looks that way." Yume nodded her head. "But my files are not complete, Tenchi. I have a catalogue of information about the project itself — the genetics, and the procedures involved. But where and when it was carried out is missing. It's almost as if he only preserved the things he thought might be needed again — namely the

ingredients list. It's possible that wherever he worked on this, there is a more complete record. But it's not within my mind."

"Then tell me what you do know." Tenchi said softly. "In as clear language as you can, please. I'm not sure I'll follow a whole bunch of genetic jargon, but I want to know if this guy is the kind of guy to hurt my fiancée."

"That's more difficult to say." Washu tapped her fingers absently on the table-top. "In brief, Tenchi, this Project Z was based on some of my own theories and ideas. Postulations I'd made during my time at the Academy — notes I'd dashed down during the time I was working on the cabbit ship. I had many, many ideas of this nature, when I was still an alumnus. Not all of them met ethical codes, so I kept most of it under wraps. But when I decided to create a being for real, I stored all my information on a powerful organic computer I built to help mastermind my experiments. The last time I went to the Academy, my computer was missing. It seems almost a certainty that Clay took it, and used whatever he could glean from it to discover my secrets."

"Including your creation of Ryoko?" Tenchi asked. Washu shrugged.

"I erased everything on Ryoko before I was imprisoned by the Academy Elders." She said frankly. "And I assumed that noone else had access to my computer before that time, because of it's restricted location. The only other person who knew it existed at all was Kichi, and she couldn't get to it without my help. Perhaps I was overly sure. I know that Clay worked for Kagato for a time. They both had the mutual goal of getting rid of me, after all. It's possible that by some fluke Clay discovered my computer, and that's how Kagato came to know about Kichi. He might have known from the time Ryoko was only a couple of years old that the girl existed... and that was the time I was locked away. If he did discover this information before my imprisonment, then it would have been before I wiped the drives clean. And I might have led Kagato straight to Kichi, Ryoko and the Dark Heart."

"Meantime Clay used that information to create a Ryoko of his own." Yume added softly. "He certainly had access to files of that nature. But Washu did not write everything down, so he was forced to fill in the gaps with his own speculation. I remember that he spent a lot of time referring back to her work and then trying various procedures. Many failed, but at long last he hit upon something that didn't — a combination of powerful genes that he was able to fuse together and form a being from."

“Which would have been Z.” Washu added. “From what I can tell, this creation of Clay’s is not so very old, not in relative terms. If you accept that Ryoko is about seven of your centuries, then I’d estimate that this Z person is only around one, or maybe one and a half. It took a long time for Clay to perfect his technique enough to generate something that would live. And even then, there were a lot of things wrong with his project. You saw how bright this guy’s power was — too bright. Dangerous, even. Despite giving his project life, Clay was not able to stabilise his magic or his cell structure. And so, in the end, Project Z was discarded. Yume’s memories were archived, and the files relegated to the back-burner as he turned his mind to something else.”

“No wonder he’s nursing a grudge.” Tenchi frowned. “But why Ryoko? I mean, effectively, she’s the same as him, right? She was created in the same way. Why would she be a target? Is it because he blames her for his creation? Because he was based on her prototype?”

“I rather think the opposite is true.” Washu said with a pensive sigh. “From what he said during our fight, I think he believes by taking Ryoko hostage, he’s actually freeing her. That she’s my project, and I’m using her as such... I think he imagines that he’s doing the girl a favour.”

“He’s pretty screwed up.” Yume added succinctly. “But given the data Washu and I were reading over, well, it’s not all that surprising.”

“So he thinks he’s helping her.” Tenchi looked startled. “And that’s why he wants to kill you? Because you created all of this mess in the first place?”

“You have such a way of phrasing things.” Washu said ruefully. “I imagine so. After all, Clay did work from my files. It’s more than probable that Z believes me involved in his creation, too. From Yume’s memory files, Z hasn’t had the same kind of freedom Ryoko has always had. He was a prisoner of Clay’s laboratory for most of his life — forced to undergo many different and sometimes unpleasant experiments day in and day out. Then he was discarded without a second thought... he has a lot of reasons to be resentful.”

Yume dropped her gaze.

“I helped to torment him.” She admitted uneasily. “As Zero, I carried out Clay’s orders to the letter. It never occurred to me that I would be hurting him... not then. But now, when I remember those things, it makes me unsteady. I don’t like it at all.”

She sighed.

“Clay would not have been able to perceive that Z had feelings.” She added. “He couldn’t grasp it in me, when I first turned to him for help after Tokimi upset my programming. He dismissed it as impossible, because I was his creation and his slave. I was just there to follow his whims and obey his instructions. Z must have been the same. Only I was a more stable experiment, so he kept me by his side.”

“I’m almost starting to feel sorry for this guy.” Tenchi sighed heavily. “If all those things are true, he must have had a pretty rough time.”

“I’m guessing so.” Washu agreed grimly. “But right now I’m not sure sympathy is the right emotion. Tenchi, this instability of his was a factor when Clay turfed him out. That’s beyond doubt. Over time, with noone monitoring it, it’s probably become worse. We know what powerful magic can do to a body, and his can’t handle the forces warring for control inside of him. When he lets out a powerful flare of energy like the ones he launched at me on that abandoned space rock, he probably damages more of his cells than he can hope to repair. Eventually he won’t be able to stave off molecular collapse any longer. In short, he’s a time bomb waiting to go off — and right now he’s a time bomb who has Ryoko trapped at his side.”

“Ryoko!” Tenchi’s eyes widened. “You think he might kill her?”

“I think it might be beyond his control.” Washu said, and Tenchi could see the troubled look in her green eyes. “If I’m right about how dangerous he is, we need to find him as soon as we can. Time might not be on Ryoko’s side.”

“I see.” Tenchi’s eyes clouded. “In which case, we’re still back to square one. We still need to find her.”

“I think that goes without saying.” Washu grimaced. “The more I learn about this, the more mixed my feelings become, Tenchi. When time does run out for Z, someone or something is going to get hurt. I can’t help but think we should try and prevent that, if we can.”

“You mean, kill him ourselves?” Tenchi looked aghast. “Before he can implode half of the universe in his blast?”

“I don’t know.” Washu admitted. “I really don’t. But I think he’s more than a little bit aware of his debility. He drew us away from the Earth, and away from Ryoko, when he chose to fight us. That means that he was aware of how volatile his magic really is — and that he took the gamble that something could go badly wrong if he lost control completely. It also suggests he doesn’t want to cause a mass

slaughter, either. It's just me that he has a grudge against. And when I stop and think about that, there's more logic to it than simply the fact I created Ryoko. If Clay based this process off my work, then no doubt he mentioned my name in front of Z at times. He must think that I was the mastermind — that even though we never met, I was the one who plotted his creation, and ordered all of those tests to be carried out."

"That makes sense." Tenchi nodded. "Even though it was Clay working on his own, I can see how he'd get confused."

"Clay wasn't working on his own." Yume said softly. "That's the other part of the puzzle. Project Z wasn't just a random experiment he decided to do on a whim. Its purpose was to provide a strong fighting force... a being, or maybe, in time, a *series* of beings who would be strong enough to challenge and destroy a force as potent as Tsunami."

"You mean *Tokimi* was behind this?" Tenchi's eyes almost fell out of his head. "I thought she was technophobic! Even if she was under Kihaku's influence during all of this, why would she care about creating clones in a lab?"

"Tokimi wanted revenge on Tsunami. I don't think she cared how she got it. You know yourself how desperate she became, before we freed her from her curse." Washu said slowly. "She's spoken to me since, in cryptic sentences, about a time when a demon had control of her soul — even she knows that something strong and dark once ran through her, although thankfully she remembers very little. But under the strength of that magic, I'm sure she would have endorsed Clay to do whatever it took to achieve her goal. And that he stole my work to do it, well, so much the better. This Z creature was born of Tokimi's DNA and another's... possibly even Clay's own, although I have my doubts. Tokimi would have wanted her newly created army to be powerful, hence why she was willing to use her own genes... but I don't know who else Clay might have had access to, to combine with her in order to make a being as strong as this Z is."

"So Z is effectively your nephew." Tenchi shook his head slowly. "Yeesh. I can't imagine Tokimi letting Clay that close to her. Didn't you say Ryoko was created from your ova?"

"She was, but you're right. Tokimi would not have allowed Clay such access to her body." Washu shook her head. "His files relate to genetic samples from Tokimi, but it seems that all he had were samples of her hair. It's possible to manipulate DNA from any source, if you have the knowhow — I only had hair samples from Kagato to work with when I first began to dabble in generating Ryoko. It looks

likely that Clay did a fair bit of genetic dabbling. Perhaps it's another reason why his project failed. He used inferior genetic samples, and he tried to rush the project to meet Tokimi's demands."

"And when it failed, she lost interest and demanded he got rid of everything." Yume added. "Which is of course what he did. Clay would rather have died than risk betraying Tokimi. He was terrified of her, but he was also devoted to her cause."

Tenchi frowned.

"So now we have to mop up Clay's mess again." He muttered. "Well, I guess that's fine. We shouldn't be sitting around here, if we know that at the very least. There must be some kind of clue in all of this."

"I think that our next port of call must be the Science Academy." Washu said thoughtfully, getting to her feet and scooping up her empty bowl. "And the lab beyond my old workplace. That's where my computer once was — and it's also the only way to access the lab where Ryoko was originally born. Maybe we'll get a better idea of how Clay managed his little project by going there."

"Don't the Academy hate you?" Tenchi eyed her doubtfully, and Washu nodded.

"Yep." She agreed cheerfully. "But it keeps life interesting. I need to know how he found his way into my lab, and whether or not Tokimi might have been involved. This is like a treasure hunt — we have to piece together all of the clues before it begins to make sense."

Before either Tenchi or Yume could respond, there was a mad yowl from outside the window and a small ball of chocolate coloured fluff tumbled over the sill, righting herself almost immediately and charging across the chamber towards them, letting out wild cries and calls as she dove into Tenchi's lap, nuzzling up against him. Tenchi frowned, reaching down to gently scoop her up, and she raised excited gold eyes to his, pawing frantically at his fingers as she did so.

"Ryo Ohki?" He murmured. "What is it? What are you trying to tell us?"

Ryo Ohki mewed again, and Tenchi's eyes opened wide with realisation.

"Ryoko." he whispered. "Do you know where she is? Has she contacted you?"

Ryo Ohki flicked her ears, and Washu came to stand behind them,

crouching down and holding out her hand to the cabbit. Ryo Ohki cocked her head for a moment, then leapt into Washu's grip, lowering her head as she rubbed her forehead against the scientist's skin. As she did so, the gem on her brow glowed pinkish, and Washu's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"Ryo Ohki sensed Ryoko." She said softly. "Which means she's definitely alive."

"Where?" Tenchi was on his feet in an instant. "Where is she, Washu? We have to go there. Forget the Academy — we have to rescue Ryoko!"

"It's only a vague sense. She must be a long way from the Earth." Washu shook her head. "Even Ryo Ohki can't quite pick up on exact coordinates."

"But surely she must have some idea."

"It's a particular planetary sector, but it's still a wide area of space to go searching in." Washu sighed. "And we already know that this Z person has pretty good foresight. We don't know what might happen if we were to charge blindly into his web. He might try and challenge us — and in his condition, that could prove fatal for more than just him. If we're going to take him by surprise, we need to be sure of where we're going. So for now, we can't do anything about it."

"But Washu!"

"No, Washu is right." Yume said quietly. "Z is strong and he is volatile. We don't want to give him any warning that we're on our way until we know exactly what we're doing. It might antagonise him, and put Ryoko in further danger."

"You said yourself that we were running out of time." Tenchi said desperately. "What good is it if we get to her too late? Washu, she's calling for our help — how can we abandon her?"

"Ryoko didn't call for help." Washu pursed her lips, eyeing the cabbit pensively as she did so. "She merely sent a message to Ryo Ohki that she was safe. That's all. Their connection is faint and easily broken at the moment, so maybe she wasn't able to say more. But it seemed to me that Ryoko was calm enough. She certainly didn't seem to be demanding us to rescue her at once."

"She... didn't?" Tenchi faltered, and Washu shrugged.

"I guess that this is more complicated than we understand." She said simply. "Or maybe she's just reasoned out what we have. Maybe

she knows Z is volatile and she doesn't want us — or at least, *you*, Tenchi — plunging blindly into danger. For the time being, anyway, I think we progress with our original plan. We'll go to the Academy and hope for the best where Ryoko is concerned.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

The sun was beginning to rise over the horizon as Ryoko stirred from her sleeping place, faint glimmers of light flickering through cracks in the roof above her head as she sat up, stretching and stifling a yawn. For a moment she could not imagine where she was, and then, as she heard the hoarse, even breathing of her companion, her memories flooded back to her and she frowned, pulling herself into a sitting position and discarding her blanket as she dropped deftly down onto the cold steel panels of the floor. A quick glance at Zakari told her that her captor was still lost in dreams, and she watched him for a moment, noting that the colour had returned to his cheeks and the strange shadowing had faded from around his eyes. She pursed her lips, eying the odd flickers of light that occasionally danced across his skin.

“You’re really screwed up.” She said softly. “And I don’t have much time to do something about it. Damn it, I wish I understood more about science and all that stuff. Standing here watching over him isn’t going to prevent his magic from exploding out, if he’s really as volatile as he says. But then, I can’t just take off and leave him, either. This planet could be anywhere — for all I know there are people living here. And I won’t have their deaths on my conscience.”

She sighed, shaking her head as she hovered upwards, pushing her hands against the ceiling as she phased through layers of steel, rock and earth. At length she broke through to the surface, and she dusted herself down, gazing around her with a mixture of confusion and curiosity.

“What is this place?” She murmured, placing a hand hesitantly on the ruined column of the old castle entrance. “A feudal palace? It must be ancient. Is this really the kind of place Clay had his lab? That nutcase... who’d build a lab in the middle of an ancient castle?”

She launched herself into the air, landing carefully on the parapet of the one remaining tower as she surveyed the landscape. A cold, eerie wind whipped at her hair, and she frowned, taking in the hazy atmosphere and the bright, penetrating gleam of the amber sun that hung over the sky. Further to the west, she could see a series of closed dome complexes, indicating that her instincts had indeed been right.

“This is a populated planet.” She mused. “Which means that Zakari’s being here is dangerous for more than just him and me. I wonder if, if I was to go exploring a little further, he’d wake up and notice that I’d gone. I don’t want to send him on a rampage, but I did tell him I wasn’t going to run off. Damn his obstinacy! There might be someone who knows how to help him. Didn’t he say he belonged to some kind of scientific research facility, before he took up on this crusade?”

She frowned, launching herself into flight as she darted across the sky, dodging heavy, sinister looking clouds as she darted closer to the silvery gleam of the domes. As she drew closer, she could make out lettering across the front of each and she hesitated, squinting through the hazy atmosphere as she struggled to read the words.

“Heiwa Research Facility.” She murmured, biting her lip as she considered. “Heiwa. Is that a place? A city or a planet? Is that where I am? But dammit, where’s Heiwa when it’s at home? I can’t say the name means anything to me.”

She eyed the dome for a moment, then made up her mind, phasing through the thick protective material and into the complex itself.

“Well, they sure like their artificial lighting in this place.” She mused, gazing around her at the multitude of panel bulbs that flanked the hallway on either side. “God knows what their electricity bill must be like, but I bet noone bothered to tell them about global warming. No wonder it’s so empty and creepy outside. That sun is way too angry looking — I guess the people just hide away in here and hope it will all go away.”

She smiled ruefully, remembering her conversation with her captor.

“Perhaps that’s why Clay chose to have his lab here.” She realised. “Somewhere where noone ventures outside of limits... which means that noone would ever stumble on his work, illegal or otherwise. And that’s why Zakari came here, too. Maybe it’s not so dumb, hiding in a feudal estate after all. Nobody would look there for an old lab, after all. I take it back. The old fool wasn’t as much of a fool as I thought.”

“Can I help you?”

A man’s voice startled her and she turned, eying the stranger with a mixture of confusion and surprise.

“You’re not a member of the facility, are you?” The man offered her a smile. “You must have come through from the annexe — but you look lost. Were you looking for someone in particular?”

“Someone?” Ryoko faltered, taken aback by the lack of confrontation in his manner, and the man smiled.

“You seem confused.”

“I’m just surprised that you’re not sending security droves after me.” Ryoko admitted. “I really only came here out of curiosity... I wanted to see what was inside this dome.”

“Well, we don’t tend to need security, on the whole.” The man told her glibly. “All the doors within the dome network are carefully rigged to prevent unauthorised intrusion, and few people can stand the glare of the Heiwan sun for very long, so noone tries the outside entrances. We get very few unwarranted interruptions, all things being equal.”

Ryoko pursed her lips, eying him thoughtfully for a moment.

“I came looking for a man called Zakari Kure.” She said slowly. “Do you happen to know him, or where I can find him? He’s... he’s a friend of a friend of mine.”

“Zakari?” The man’s demeanour changed, and his eyes clouded as he shook his head. “I’m sorry. You can’t have heard, but Dr Kure hasn’t been seen in more than three months. He was a fellow of this facility, true enough, but there was a terrible explosion in his lab and he hasn’t been seen since then. It’s... well, it’s not completely certain whether or not he survived.”

“An explosion, huh?” Ryoko narrowed her eyes. “That’s too bad. I was really hoping I might see him, too. What about... what about Komei? Is she here? Can I speak to her instead?”

“Komei Morioka?” The man shook his head again. “I’m afraid you’ve had a wasted journey. Komei-san was Dr Kure’s assistant, but she was injured in the blast also. She hasn’t been back to work since — she was knocked unconscious and she’s still receiving medical care for her injuries.”

“I see.” Ryoko tilted her head slightly. “Then you might know where I can find her?”

“She’s been taken in by family, but I couldn’t tell you where they live.” The man replied regretfully. “I wish I could be of more help, but I truly can’t. All I know is that Komei was hurt in the blast, and that she hasn’t come back to the facility since Dr Kure’s disappearance.”

Ryoko glanced at her hands, then she nodded her head.

“Then I guess I’ll leave you alone.” She said softly. “Oh, but wait —

one more thing. You said that few people could stand the sun. What did you mean?"

"Heiwa's sun has very powerful rays." The scientist seemed surprised. "You must know that, if you live here."

"Well, you could say I'm a visitor to the planet." Ryoko said ruefully. "I don't know much about Heiwa at all... I only arrived a day or two ago."

"Then let me advise you not to take too many sunlit walks outside the dome complex."

"Are you telling me that noone can step outside when it's light out there?"

"Few people dare to." The scientist shook his head. "The rays cause serious burns, and they're very painful."

"And Dr Kure? He stayed within the lab because of that reason, also?"

"Dr Kure was different. He could withstand Heiwa's sun in a way we couldn't." The man looked thoughtful. "We always wondered about it — teased him, even. But I don't know how he managed it."

"But I'm not burnt." Ryoko glanced at her fingers, then held them out for his inspection. "It was oppressive, sure, but it didn't hurt me."

Her companion glanced at her hands, faltering as he stared at her with new eyes.

"Do you mean to say you came here from... from outside? You didn't wander in from one of our annexes, along the hall?"

"I guess that's going to be a problem?" Ryoko hazarded, instinctively taking a step back. "I didn't know that it was a closed site."

"You're like Dr Kure. You're not harmed by the sun." The scientist murmured. "Are you his kinswoman? Is that why you come here seeking him?"

"I... I suppose I am. In a way, at the very least." Ryoko was taken aback. "You mean you're not going to try and arrest me?"

"I should." The man sighed. "Noone is allowed to come in from outside — you might be a spy or any kind of threat. But I was very fond of Zakari. We all were. And he's much missed. If you can resist the sun, you must be blood of his. And so I'm going to let you go — this time. Only next time, if you want to visit, please come through

the proper channels. After all, this could be my job if the board of directors got to hear about it. They're very touchy about outside interference."

"I promise, I'm not a spy. I'm not even a scientist." Ryoko assured him fervently, holding up her hands. "Just someone looking for a... a relative. That's all. I don't even know who this board of directors are — they won't hear about this from me."

She offered him a faint smile.

"Thank you for your help. I guess I'll be seeing you... and if I see Zakari, I'll be sure to tell him you miss him." She added. Then, before the man could react, she focused her energy on Clay's old lab, rematerialising above the entrance as she let out a heavy sigh.

"Well, that was productive. Not." She muttered. "But at least I know he was telling me the truth about the research facility and the explosion that drove him over the edge. The girl Komei really does exist, and he really was a scientist. Zakari Kure... Dr Zakari Kure. Somehow I feel better knowing he hasn't lied to me about those things. It makes me feel better about trying to help him — if I even can."

She made to phase back down into the lab itself, but then she paused, gazing at her hands in confusion.

"What's with this?" She asked herself aloud. "Why am I so hot on helping him? I've never felt so driven to protect someone before. Not even Tenchi has needed my help in the way this idiot Zakari does. He's potentially going to kill everyone on this silly planet — me as much as the rest. But I'm still hanging around here, even though I have absolutely no idea how to stop the bomb from going off. I must be crazy."

She turned, gazing across the sky in the direction of the hot amber sun, and she frowned.

"Or maybe there's something in the fact we're both immune to the sun." She murmured. "*Could* Washu really have been involved in this whole business somehow? I was so sure I knew her and her motives, but is it possible that we could be related? If it's so unusual to be resistant, then what are the odds that two random biological creations would both share the trait? And not only that, Zakari teleports, too. That's something I was always picked on for, because it's not a common magic. Is it possible that I've had Washu wrong all the time? Is this one of her secrets — something else she's kept from me? Dammit, I hate not knowing the answers!"

“So this is where you are.” Zakari’s voice from behind her made her start and she turned, casting him a rueful look as she met the reproach in his expression. “I thought you said you weren’t going to disappear overnight.”

“And I didn’t. I’m still here, aren’t I?” Ryoko defended herself. “But it’s boring, being stuck inside all of the time. I don’t like being cooped up — I like freedom of movement, and I wanted to see exactly what was up here.”

“Was it worth it?” Zakari asked levelly. Ryoko hesitated, then nodded her head.

“Maybe.” She agreed. “Heiwa is where we are, aren’t we, Zakari?”

“How can you be so sure?” Zakari shot her a startled look. Ryoko eyed him mischievously.

“Call it pirate’s intuition.” She said blithely. “Or maybe I just know the stories about Heiwa’s powerful amber sun.”

“Oh yes. The sun.” Zakari sighed, stretching out his arms and glancing at them absently. “The sun that burns the flesh of people who live here, but which has never so much as grazed mine with its heat.”

“Mine either.” Ryoko said quietly, holding out her hands to him. “Listen, Zakari. I have no idea right now which one of us is right in our convictions, or whether Washu really is involved in your creation. I don’t believe that she’s capable — and yet, there has to be more than a coincidence to the fact we can both walk beneath this sun without suffering physical harm. That being the case, I want to know the truth as much as you. And so I think it’s time we got to the bottom of it. Don’t you?”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Zakari eyed her warily, and Ryoko gripped him by the hand.

“There’s a possibility we could be kin.” She said softly. “If you’re right, and Washu was involved, the chances are that it’s her Kii DNA that protects us from the sun. I know that it’s protected me from many things in the past. Kihaku’s climate was supposed to be really nasty — and I’m fifty percent Kii, so I inherited their strong physical constitution. Maybe you did, also. Perhaps that’s why you’ve been able to survive your magic as long as you have.”

“So now you’re going back on your conviction that Washu is too pedantic a scientist to discard a project so easily?” Zakari raised an eyebrow. “You change your mind quicker than anyone I’ve ever met, you know.”

"I'm not sure what I believe, and it's confusing me." Ryoko said honestly. "But I do want to find out. So listen. We're not going to hang around here any longer. We're going to leave Heiwa, and I'm going to call my ship here to get us. Then we're both going to ask Washu some pertinent questions, and after that..."

"I can't." Zakari shook his head. "If your ship comes here, I might destroy her this time, and I know she's more to you than just a machine. Besides, where would you have us go? Planet Earth? What if I lose control of my magic? Earth isn't a planet with many defences, even now. I could kill a lot of innocent people, and that's not what I intended when I began this. Washu is one thing, but I won't be responsible for the mass slaughter of innocent civilians."

"Then where did you confront her before?" Ryoko looked startled. "Where did you fight her, when you came back here looking like death itself?"

"An abandoned planetoid, where noone else lives." Zakari said quietly. "If I'd imploded that, it would only have taken Washu and I with it. But your Prince intervened, and so I kept my word to you. Each time I unleash my power it becomes greater and more difficult for me to control. I wouldn't like to guess what might happen if we went to a busy place like the Earth."

Ryoko frowned.

"Then we'll have to think of something else." She said frankly. "Because I'll be damned if you're going to blow yourself up just because some scientist didn't know which genes went where."

"Why are you really helping me, Ryoko?" Zakari asked. "You were resistant to the idea when I first spoke to you — what has changed? Truly?"

"I think I've decided you're telling me the truth." Ryoko said thoughtfully. "I hate being lied to, but whatever else you've done, I don't think you've done that. So I'm prepared to believe you when you say you have an axe to grind. However..."

"However?"

"We're not going to kill anyone." Ryoko said firmly. "You're in no state to manage it, and I don't do slaying. We're going to go back inside the lab and we're going to think rationally about a way out of all of this. I'm not a scientist, but I am in control of my magic, and I do have a spaceship who'll follow me to hell and back if I ask her to. You might not have physical control of your body, but you're smart

and you understand all of this biological and scientific junk. So between us we must be able to come up with a solution. And maybe even find some way to reverse this curse that hangs over you, before it's too late for everyone on this planet."

"I still think you're wasting your time." Zakari gazed up at the hazy skyline. "And I still don't understand why you haven't left."

"Well, nor do I completely." Ryoko grabbed him by the hand, phasing them both down through the soil and earth before he could do anything to prevent her. "But you said we were the same — have you given up on that already?"

"No." Zakari admitted.

"Then shut up and listen to me." Ryoko said firmly. "Stop giving up and start thinking like someone who wants to live, okay? After all, you prove nothing if you blow yourself into component atoms. You just show the world that Clay was right about you, don't you?"

"Ryoko..."

"No more." Ryoko shook her head. "I've no intention of dying, and since I'm sticking with you for now, you're not doing anything of the sort either. So start using your brain... and let's see what we can come up with."

"How exactly are we going to get into the Science Academy, Washu?"

Tenchi pressed his hands up against the crystal of Ryo Ohki's dome, staring out towards the huge steel space station that hovered up ahead. Even from this distance, it reminded the young prince of a hive of insects, as spaceships buzzed in and out at intervals, carrying research teams or scientific exploration parties to and from their central base. Security here was, as he already knew from experience, usually fairly tight and he bit his lip, gauging their chances of slipping Ryo Ohki in between the bustling shuttles unnoticed.

"Every system has a weak link in the chain." Washu said simply. "The last time I broke into the Academy, I used a dimensional portal, and got right into the depths of my lab. However, that was before I'd really bothered to rely on my magic — I would have thought that from this distance I'll be able to teleport to the place I need to be. Even if my coordinates are sometimes inaccurate, I'm pretty sure that we don't need to take Ryo Ohki any closer to the Academy stun lasers. Yume can teleport as well, of course, and between us we can probably

get you inside. Besides, as far as I understand it, the last time you came here with Ryoko they didn't seem to mind your company. It's funny what they do when they think they have royalty in their midst."

"Yes, that's true." Tenchi pursed his lips, remembering the previous occasion that he and his fiancée had sneaked into the Academy, looking for clues about Ryoko's heritage and a scientist named Kichi Itokawa. "They did seem to accept me, once they realised I had Juraian connections. But they still insisted on marshalling us around the complex. I was under the impression that where you wanted to go wasn't exactly public property — you did say it was a secret lab?"

"Well, we'll just have to not get caught." Washu said reflectively. "Yume, I'm going to charge you with transferring Tenchi into the complex. I'm sure I can get myself where I want to be, but I'm not so very confident that I'll manage the two of us, and I don't want any mistakes. I'm still not always accurate on my teleport landings, so I'd appreciate it if you'd help out."

"Of course." Yume agreed, shooting Tenchi a warm smile as she slipped her hand into this. "Hold on tightly, Tenchi. Washu, what are the coordinates?"

"Try sector fifteen, at the furthest point you can manage." Washu replied. "I'll see you there... and Yume, if I don't appear right away, wait for me."

"All right." Yume nodded her head. "Come on, Tenchi. Let's go."

Before her companion could complain, she had flickered them both out of view, and as they rematerialised within the depths of the Academy itself, Tenchi raised a hand to his head, trying to calm the swirling sensation in his brain.

"It still weirds me out, moving through space like that." He murmured. "I'm really not built for teletransportation."

"I'm sorry." Yume looked apologetic. "But it will wear off soon. And it doesn't look like Washu's around yet, so we'll do as she said. We'll wait."

She glanced thoughtfully at her hands, as if making up her mind about something. Then, with a decided nod of her head, she clenched her fists, her entire form shimmering and changing as Tenchi watched.

"What are you doing?" He demanded. "Yume, what's happening — why are you changing how you look?"

"The last time I was here, I was here under the guise of a woman

named Manami Kurashida.” Yume said simply, as the glow faded and Tenchi found himself gazing on an unfamiliar visage. “She was an alumnus of the Academy under Washu, many, many years ago. She also has clearance for most of the departments within this place — we’ll be questioned less if I look like someone who’s meant to be here. After all, you’re of Juraian heritage — and Dr Kurashida’s focus was always Jurai.”

“I see.” Tenchi pursed his lips. “Yes, that does make sense. But what about the real Dr Kurashida? Won’t we be found out?”

“No.” Yume’s eyes clouded. “Dr Kurashida is dead, Tenchi. Clay and I eliminated her on Tokimi’s orders, back when I was Zero. It happened while she was on sabbatical, deep in space. Nobody knows she died, except for me and those I’ve told.”

She sighed, shaking her head as if to clear it, and Tenchi felt a wave of sympathy wash over him as he took in her expression.

“It feels wrong to use her identity like this, but at least it’s one way to keep her alive.” She added pensively. “I didn’t want to ever tell you that I’d killed in Clay’s name, Tenchi, but you deserve me to be honest with you.”

“Zero may have killed in Clay’s name, but I doubt Yume ever has.” Tenchi squeezed her tightly by the hand. “You know noone holds you responsible for things you did then. You were completely under his control, after all.”

“I appreciate you saying that.” Yume offered him a faint smile. “Washu said the same thing, and I try and remember it... though sometimes it isn’t easy to do.”

“There you both are.” At that moment Washu approached them, hesitating for a moment as she took in Yume’s appearance, and then smiling.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were Manami.” She said softly. “Without my Kii sight, I wouldn’t know the difference. It was good thinking, Yume. Noone will suspect one of their own, after all.”

“That’s what I thought.” Yume nodded her head. “And since I’ve been Manami on other occasions, it seemed a logical choice of appearance. Where do we go now, Washu? Manami Kurashida has clearance for most of the Academy. I should be able to get us through any locks and security screens, if necessary to do so.”

“That’s worth remembering, but we’re actually not far from where I want us to be.” Washu said thoughtfully. “This way, the both of you.

And don't draw attention to yourselves. I'm not sure how many people would recognise me on sight, particularly since I've not come here looking like this for quite a long time now. But I'm sure that Akira Itokawa and his security droids would be onto me right away. Akira-san has something of a grudge against me for his sister's death, and I can't say that I blame him, all things considered."

"I remember Akira Itokawa." Tenchi mused, as they made their way along the long, narrow corridor, strip lighting blinking overhead as they followed the maze of connecting passages towards Washu's goal. "He told Ryoko and I a lot about Kichi, when we came here. But he did seem very negative towards you, Washu. I guess even after all this time he finds it hard to forgive and forget."

"I'm sure he thinks I slayed Kichi myself." Washu agreed grimly. "And considering the truth of the matter, I could hardly correct him. Kichi knew the risks, when she took Ryoko and left for Yubisu. But even so... I did put her in the most terrible danger, when I brought her into my plans. If I'm right and if Clay actually had access to my lab and my computer system before I'd been able to erase everything about Ryoko, I may have been more careless than I ever imagined. I always thought that Kagato tracked the three gemstones by other means, but perhaps he had some help from me after all."

"Surely you wouldn't have kept the location of something that powerful on a computer system in the middle of a busy complex like this?" Tenchi objected. "I know you, Washu. You're far too cautious for that."

"Yes, as a rule." Washu agreed. "And I certainly didn't mention that it was Yubisu that Kichi had gone to. However, when you have connections like Kagato did, I imagine it can't be that difficult to track down a distinctive young woman and a small baby, not if you ask the right questions. And Yubisu was a Juraian outpost, however remote the connection to the main crown. Perhaps I wasn't as discreet as I might have been... but still, you live and learn."

At this point they reached a sliding doorway, and Washu paused, touching the metal hesitantly.

"It's probably wired up to the alarm system, after my last visit." She said pensively. "Yume, I think it's time you put Manami's genetic structure to use, if you don't mind. If I try and phase us through this door, they'll no doubt realise I'm here and send an army after me. After the last time I came, they know a little more about my magic than I'd like them to, all things considered. And I'd rather avoid a confrontation."

“No problem.” Yume stepped forwards, running her palm over the scanner and waiting patiently as the computer system whirred into life, scanning the iris of her eye. A green light flashed, and the door creaked back, revealing the laboratory beyond.

“Enter, Dr Manami Kurashida.” An electronic voice rumbled. “Security clearance granted.”

“Well, that was easy.” Tenchi murmured, as they stepped inside the lab itself, the door slipping shut behind them. “Hey, what on Earth happened to this place, Washu? It looks like a bomb hit it!”

“Well, close.” Washu looked rueful. “The last time I was here, I was a little bit frisky... shall we just say I was in a hurry, and Akira and company took me off guard. I wasn’t totally sure whether I could still phase right through to my secret lab, so I took the short cut.”

She gestured in the direction of the back wall, which still bore a large blast-hole across the centre. “Which would be that way, although it’s not really so secret any more.”

“Whatever was in there has probably been taken and examined since.” Yume observed, as she stepped neatly over the rubble, pausing at the rough-edged hole and peering inside. “There’s nothing here.”

“There wasn’t the last time I came, either.” Washu assured her. “My organic computer was gone, even though the wall had not been broken at that time. The only thing I can think of is that somehow Clay managed to locate it and get inside to steal the machine. And to do that, he must have had help from Tokimi. I didn’t realise he was involved with her so early, or that she was even still around... but she must have been, it’s the only way. Seiryō’s told me on a couple of occasions that Tokimi transferred him in and out of places as if teleporting, and I know Kiyone’s said the same thing about when Seiryō crept up on her aboard Yagami. It’s the only solution to what happened — Tokimi slipped Clay in here, and he stole the computer, thereby gaining access to any files about Ryoko.”

She smiled slightly.

“Although he’d have had a job getting everything out of it.” She added. “Even if he had managed to hack through and access some of my data, I imagine that the machine still foxed him, right up until his death. It wasn’t built for men like him to have easy access to — and if I know my computer system, it would have done its best to throw him off track.”

“It could think for itself?” Yume stared, and Washu nodded.

“It was based on the same principles as you and Ryo Ohki.” She agreed. “Sadly, since it isn’t here and since it seems likely Tokimi was involved in the theft, I imagine it probably got destroyed when I blew up Kihaku. No doubt that’s where it was so easily concealed from prying eyes. Still, maybe its for the best, in some respects. Not all of my technology should fall into alien hands, let’s just leave it at that.”

“But if this place is empty, what are we doing here?” Tenchi questioned. “Why come all this way, just to stand in an empty antechamber?”

“Not everything is quite what it seems.” Washu said simply, slipping her hand into the folds of her gown and pulling out a small, flat device which she pressed up against the back wall, keying some numbers into a tiny keypad as she waited for the machine to respond. It whirred and beeped, flashing a blue light and Washu nodded, a smile of satisfaction on her face.

“I thought so.” She mused. “The alumni haven’t got this far... fools. It was a sad day for the Academy when people stopped seeing beyond the obvious — but at least it means that nobody here has discovered my other secret.”

She pulled a small pocket knife from her breast pocket, dashing it decisively across the tip of her index finger, and Tenchi let out an exclamation.

“Washu! What are you doing?”

“Acquiring some of my blood to open the door.” Washu said calmly, pressing her bloody finger to the device. “Watch and learn, Tenchi. Imitating my physical form is one thing, but providing a synthetic sample of Kii blood is another. This was my ultimate security lock, after all. Even after all this time, nobody has broken it. Pay close attention, both of you. We’re about to visit the place where my bad daughter took her first few breaths.”

“*What?*” As Tenchi stared at his companion in disbelief, he saw the blood on Washu’s hand seep slowly into the device, causing it to send out a series of coloured lights. At length the light flared a vibrant green, and before their eyes the wall began to shimmer and fade, disappearing into darkness as a passageway began to open up. At the end of the short hallway was a further door, and as Washu stepped neatly towards it, she turned to beckon them to join her.

“It’s quite safe.” She promised. “It leads into subspace, like my lab on the Earth. It’s based on the same principles and it’s entirely stable, I assure you.”

Tenchi exchanged looks with Yume, who shrugged her shoulders.

“I have faith in Washu-san’s science.” She said softly. “Come on, Tenchi. We don’t want to spend too much time here, in case we’re disturbed.”

“Right. I’m coming.” Tenchi nodded resolutely, following her through the opening and swallowing his misgivings as the door faded and flickered away behind him, closing off the opening. “We can get out of here again, right?”

“We’ll be fine.” Washu nodded her head. “So long as I’m here, we can get out any time we want. Are you still following? Good. In here. This door... through here.”

She pressed her hand to the wall, and one of the panels slid back to allow them entrance to a further chamber, brightly lit and well appointed, as if it had not been centuries since the last time someone had visited. Strange ancient-looking lamps flickered in alcoves, giving it an oddly anachronistic feel, and as he gazed on it, Tenchi was reminded of the lab within the core of Kihaku.

“It was based on my Kii hideaway.” Washu seemed to guess his thoughts, for she smiled, nodding her head. “I felt that my best chance of keeping this out of strange hands was to rely on my roots just a little bit. It gives it an interesting appearance, I know — but in a way, it’s more like home. And I wanted to create Ryoko somewhere that wasn’t just another cold, empty lab. She was my special project, after all. I didn’t want her to be born in just another soulless lab unit.”

“It’s not really a lab.” Yume said pensively. “It’s more of a... a shrine, somehow. Washu, I’ve never seen anything quite like it. Even at Kihaku, it wasn’t like this.”

She moved across to the far wall, running her fingers along the wood-finish panels.

“You can’t pretend that you didn’t take special care with this place.”

“It’s just... amazing.” Tenchi agreed.

Washu sighed, hauling herself up onto an empty unit and kicking her legs idly against the door as she did so.

“Perhaps shrine is a better word.” She owned, and Tenchi followed her gaze, pursing his lips as he noticed a small alcove in one wall. As he approached it carefully, Washu let out an exclamation, materialising in front of him and holding up her hands.

“Hey, Tenchi, some things are sacred.” She said warningly. “Look but don’t touch, huh?”

“I’m sorry.” Tenchi looked taken aback. “I was just... well... looking.”

Washu sighed, shaking her head. Slowly her arms dropped back down at her sides.

“No, I’m being unreasonable.” She said with a sigh, stepping aside. “It’s just... well, I suppose I’m a little exposed here. That’s all. Like I’ve let my guard down a lot by bringing people here. I swore I never would come here again, after I sealed it up. I’ve broken my word to myself in even setting foot inside, but to bring others too — I guess I’m not sure how I feel about it, in the long run.”

“I won’t even look, if you don’t want me to.” Tenchi assured her. “I didn’t realise it was something private.”

“It won’t hurt anything, if you do. Or change anything.” Washu shrugged. “Ignore me. This place makes me twitchy. Many, many memories.”

Tenchi eyed her doubtfully for a moment. Then he nodded, taking a step forward and peering into the little dip in the wall, biting his lip as he registered what Washu had been trying to protect. A small, dogeared photograph of a fair haired man had been carefully placed in a black wood frame, beneath which rows of unfamiliar characters were scrawled in long, intricate lines. Before the image stood an incense burner and two small candles, a taper at their side. Surprise flooded his expression, and he turned to meet her sheepish gaze with his own confused one.

“Mikamo.” Washu said briefly. “That’s all. It was a long time ago.”

“Mikamo.” Tenchi frowned. “The man you lost.”

“The man Kagato slaughtered.” Washu corrected darkly. “Yes. If ever I felt I was losing my focus, this was my motivation. I wasn’t going to give up while there was still a need for revenge, Tenchi.”

She slid her hand into the alcove, removing the picture and glancing at it for a moment. A faint smile touched her face as she slipped it out of the frame, returning the black holder to the alcove and placing the image inside the folds of her gown.

“He can come with me, now.” She said softly. “Away from this place. After all, it has nothing to do with me now — or my life. He doesn’t deserve to be sealed away here, in a place I never come.”

“So this was really where Ryoko was born.” Tenchi moved across the room, resting his hands against a big clear-fronted cabinet in the furthest corner. As he gazed at it, he saw numbers printed across a silver band that ran from one side to the other, and Washu came to join him, a nostalgic expression on her face as she touched the metal strip pensively.

“Yes.” She agreed. “Maybe it seems terrible to you, to generate anything living in a place like this. But I didn’t have a lot of options open to me. This was my solution to the problem... Ryoko was the only, shall we say, creation to come out of this lab. Once she was born, and safely away with Kichi, I sealed the lab off completely.”

“I think maybe you remember more about her birth than you told her.” Tenchi eyed her gravely, and Washu shrugged her shoulders.

“Perhaps.” She agreed. “To be honest, coming here doesn’t fill me with joy. It’s been a long time, but I can’t pretend that this is somewhere I want to be. It’s full of memories — sad memories.”

“So why are we here? What is there in this lab that can help us track down Z?” Yume asked. “We’ve ascertained that it was sealed from the outside, and that to get into it, you’d need to be able to have access to your blood... so surely noone’s touched it in generations.”

“Well, that’s what I’m wondering.” Washu owned, biting her lip. “I had a thought, coming here, when I reviewed everything we’d already learnt. I locked this lab based on Kii blood. I thought I was the last Kii to survive, and there are elements which exist only in the haemoglobin of pureblooded children of our planet. But I was wrong... Tokimi wasn’t dead. She was sealed away somewhere, perhaps — dormant, and sleeping. But she wasn’t lost. And if my blood broke the seal, I think it’s very possible that hers would break it, also. Which means...”

“Clay came here?” Tenchi turned, eying her curiously. Washu nodded.

“I think he might have. After I was long gone.” She admitted unwillingly. “He managed to break into my lab on the Earth... and I’m afraid that if he could do that, he could come here.”

“He never brought me here.” Yume said thoughtfully. “I’m sure I’d remember, if he’d used blood to open a lab seal.”

“Then it’s likely he came alone. Maybe after other experiments failed to provide the results he hoped for.” Washu said bleakly. “I think he came looking for samples of Ryoko’s DNA — something he

could clone, or at least work with. Something more tangible than Tokimi's hair."

"But we know that Project Z was built from Tokimi's DNA. Don't we?" Tenchi asked. "You're not going to tell me that he was cloned from Ryoko, now?"

"No, he can't have been. I destroyed all of Ryoko's gene samples the minute she was born." Washu shook her head. "I wasn't going to take that kind of a risk. But... there was something I kept. Something I thought would be secure here... and something which I preserved in case I needed it again. After all, I had endless supplies of my own genetic material. But..."

She shook her head, crossing the floor towards a flat-fronted black unit, and running her fingers beneath the rim until she found the catch to release the door. It swung back, revealing rows of identical cubbyholes, and as Tenchi came to peer over her shoulder, Washu crouched before them, examining each one at a time. At length she cursed, shaking her head.

"As I feared." She murmured, reaching in to pull out an empty petri dish. "Nothing left. Just this, and it's empty. He must have been here. And he took the lot."

"The lot of what?" Yume looked puzzled. "Something other than Ryoko's DNA? But if nothing else was created here..."

"Ryoko was created from my ova and Kagato's DNA." Washu said soberly. "Which I had to work with a lot, to make it suitable for the project. I didn't have a chance to take massive samples — just a few strands of his hair, and that was all. So I had to multiply it several times to make it strong enough to use. I kept several back up samples, in case Ryoko didn't succeed first time around. There was no going back to Jurai, after all. The man had already tried to kill me on two occasions even since I'd come back to the Academy. I couldn't risk making any more contact with the man and attracting any more attention to myself and my project. After all, I also had the Dark Heart of Jurai in my possession at that time — sealed away here, ready for Kichi to take with her to Yubisu as part of Ryoko's training and upbringing. Mikamo's shrine served two purposes — it also concealed the hiding place where I kept the gemstones."

"So what Clay stole... was *Kagato's* DNA?" Tenchi asked hesitantly. Washu stood, nodding her head.

"Looks that way." She said grimly. "Which might explain a lot. This Z is very powerful, and Kagato was possessed of immense spiritual

powers, whether he used them for good or for evil. Tokimi's cells were drenched in Kii magic at the time the experiment took place — chances are some of it would have seeped through into the samples Clay used to generate his little creation. I was very, very careful when I structured Ryoko's DNA, because I knew that she would need to be very strong, if she had a hope of managing the kind of power her father wielded. And I spent a lot of time making sure she would develop properly and be stable. But it looks to me like Clay took no such care with his own project. If he mingled Kii magic and Kagato's dark arts together in a body that wasn't able to handle it, then no wonder his work was unstable. Z really is a time bomb, and we're dealing with seriously bad consequences if that time bomb goes off any time soon."

"You really think he did that? He used Kagato's DNA to blend with Tokimi's?" Yume stared. "He did work for Kagato — if he was going to do that, why come to your lab to get the samples? Why not just speak to Kagato himself?"

"Because Kagato didn't know about any of this, just like he didn't know about Ryoko's birth until later." Tenchi said softly. "He did this for Tokimi, which means that he placed loyalty to her over loyalty to Kagato. I guess she would have been able to protect him from Kagato's rages more than anyone else — it was probably a wise decision. But Clay wasn't the scientist you are, Washu. He didn't know what he was doing."

"He was also building a machine." Washu sighed, turning her back on the cabinet and kicking it shut with a flick of her foot. "I was building my daughter. It makes a difference. He had absolutely no human feeling towards what he was creating. Me, I had far more than was good for me. Even though I told myself that she was a weapon, well, I was a mother watching my child grow and develop more each day. Of course I did everything I could to ensure she would be healthy and strong. What mother would do less?"

"Washu." Tenchi rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, and Washu seemed to stir herself from her pensive reverie, offering him a faint smile.

"I know. Many years ago." She said simply. "Well, we've ascertained what I wanted to know, anyway. Time to get out of here, and summon Ryo Ohki. If Z is the kind of enemy I think he is, we can't play it cautious any longer. Despite the risks, we can't hang around. We need to find Ryoko, and quickly — before this man's volatile magic flares out of control completely."

“Or before he tries to kill my fiancée.” Tenchi said darkly, as he turned on his heel, watching as Washu re-opened the doorway into the main Academy complex. “I’m with you, Washu. The sooner we find them the better, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Then let me just seal this up again, and we’ll be off.” Washu promised, reaching up to detach her device from the wall of the lab. As Tenchi watched, the dimensional doorway flickered and faded, leaving nothing but a hard panel wall behind it and as he flexed tentative fingers in its direction, he realised that there was nothing but cold steel beneath his touch. Washu winked at him, nodding her head.

“Like I said, its not easy to find your way in unless you know what you’re looking for.” She said playfully. “It’ll be safe for another few hundred years, no doubt.”

“Stop right there, Washu Hakubi! State your purpose!”

A voice from behind them prevented Tenchi from responded and the three spun around, meeting the accusatory gaze of Akira Itokawa, the man in charge of Science Academy security. Tenchi remembered only too well the man’s visage, and he found his mind flitting back once more to Ryoko and the young woman who had died trying to protect her. Akira was Kichi’s brother, he mused sadly. And still, it seemed, as bent on nursing his grudge as ever.

“You seem to have a sixth sense where I’m concerned, Itokawa-san.” Washu said softly, light flickering faintly across her fingers as she surveyed the intruder. “Why else would you come to this part of the Academy? I thought that noone was allowed to work here. Not since I left it. Just in case I’d left it full of holes and traps to catch unwitting scientists in.”

“Don’t even think of trying your witch magic on me.” Akira snapped. “I know what you are, and I’m not going to tolerate you flitting in and out of here as if you own the place. You are banished, Washu. Banished! You could at least have respect enough to abide by the elders’ decision!”

“I came to find something that belonged to me. Something I left behind.” Washu said curtly. “It’s none of your business, but so long as I don’t interfere in scientific practices, I don’t think the elders would mind me reclaiming my own forgotten property.”

“That depends on the nature of said property.” Akira’s eyes narrowed and his grip tightened on the stun gun in his hand. Behind him, the security droids massed and whirred, lights flickering across their sensors as they prepared themselves for a heated conflict. “You

push your luck, Washu. Under no circumstances are you welcome here. If you did indeed have something legitimate to claim, then you should have applied through the proper channels. There is no place for you here. You have no authority being here.”

“She has my authority, Itokawa-san.” Yume stood forward at that moment, eying him gravely as he took a startled step back, staring at her in confusion. Tenchi found he was scarcely less so, as Yume crossed the floor, resting a gentle hand on Akira’s shoulder.

“Washu is here under my supervision.” She said softly. “She will do no harm, and now we will leave.”

“K... K... Kurashida-sensei!” Akira faltered, then he seemed to recover himself, shaking his head. “Of all people, how could you trust that woman? You were my sister’s roommate and friend — how can you betray Kichi in this manner?”

“Akira-san.” Yume eyed him for a moment, then she shook her head. “You must grieve for Kichi a great deal. Washu-sensei is not responsible for her murder, however. That was at the hands of the despotic Prince of Jurai, not your former colleague and fellow alumni. Kagato ordered Kichi’s murder... just as he tried to order Washu’s own, several years ago. Washu sent Kichi to Yubisu to try and protect her. Do not blame her because her well-meaning attempts failed.”

“Yume.” Tenchi murmured, starting as Washu grasped him by the hand. He eyed her in confusion, and Washu shook her head slightly.

“Let her do what she was built to do.” She said softly. “I’d rather we leave here without another conflict — we don’t have the time to be dodging stun guns and besides, nothing she’s telling him is a lie.”

“I almost think you’d rather have your name cleared than confront Akira in any way.” Tenchi eyed her keenly, and Washu shrugged.

“Men like him don’t matter to me.” She said flippantly, although from the colour in her cheeks Tenchi knew he had hit the mark. “Though in truth, Tenchi, I’d rather have heard the words spoken by the real Manami Kurashida. Still, such is life. I do regret that we never had a chance to renew our acquaintance.”

“Kurashida-sensei?” Akira was eying Yume in confusion. “What are you saying... what about the hearing? What about...?”

“Dr Clay’s attempt to frame a good and hard-working scientist?” Yume said evenly. “Washu was framed by Clay. Clay was working for Kagato. Why else did I leave this place for so long afterwards? The Academy was tainted by corruption. Washu was imprisoned on

trumped-up charges. I wanted no part in the censure of an old friend. And for Kichi's sake, Akira, nor should you. Washu and I are leaving now, and she won't be returning to this place. You can call off your security droids. We will not fight you. We come and we leave in peace."

"Manami-san..." Akira faltered, then slowly, he lowered his weapon. "All right. Leave, but do it quickly, before I change my mind. Even if you speak the truth about my sister, I still do not trust Washu Hakubi."

"You heard him, Washu-sensei." Yume turned grave eyes on her companions. "It's time to go."

"Agreed." Washu set her teeth, reaching out to grasp both Tenchi and Yume by the hands. "Then to Ryo Ohki. And hopefully, to Ryoko."

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

It was all so confusing.

Zakari leant back against the worn stone pillars that flanked the entrance to the old feudal castle, gazing upwards into the hazy blue of the sky as he shielded his gaze from the penetrating amber sun. A shadow flitted overhead, followed by the gentle sound of something landing nearby, and he turned his gaze, eying his companion pensively in the bright midday light.

“I still don’t know if this is the right thing to do.” He said quietly, and she turned, casting him a playful smile as she dropped down beside him.

“You worry too much.” She scolded. “Besides, I told you. I’m not going to let you die on my watch, and nor am I about to let everyone on Heiwa get blown up because you’ve never been taught self control. My solution is the only one going — you better face up to it and accept it.”

“Asking for help wasn’t exactly on my agenda.” Zakari hauled himself upright, dusting himself down as the particles of sand and soil clung to his skin. He frowned, feeling the strange prickles of energy within him, and he shook his head. “And I’m not sure you’re thinking as clearly as you could be. I’ve already tried to kill Washu and the chances are that I’ll kill you, too. I don’t think that going to the Earth is a good idea, nor do I think that your Washu will even want to help, after the confrontation we already had. It’s a hopeless situation. You’d be better off letting me just die.”

“We both know what happens if I do that.” Ryoko shook her head. “At best, you blow this settlement to the ground. At worst, you blow the whole planet into smithereens. Listen to me. The last time a planet exploded, it let loose a demon who was bent on killing people I care about. I don’t really know if there are any more sealed demons in this solar system, but I don’t want to take the risk. And besides, when Kihaku exploded, noone was living there. This is different. They might hide away in domes and cringe from the sun, but there are people on Heiwa.”

She hesitated, softening her voice as she took him gently by the

hand.

“Your Komei might be one of them.” She said quietly, and despite himself Zakari flinched, gazing up at her in consternation. Ryoko nodded.

“If you are like me in any way, you won’t want to put her in danger. Regardless of what becomes of you.” She said matter-of-factly, dropping his hand and settling herself on a wind-weathered lump of rock as she gazed at him in earnest. “And I know from what you’ve said that that is how you feel. So we’re going to try my way of doing things first. I mean, if it doesn’t work out, you can still revert to your self-combustion plan. I won’t be able to stop you, after all. But at least this way you might have a hope of stopping this. And wherever you choose to die, you’re going to have an impact on someone. You said yourself that the impulses are getting stronger. If you brought me down as easily as you did on the moon, that’s pretty scary magic.”

“I suppose you do have an odd kind of logic.” Zakari sighed. “You confuse me, but I’m glad you didn’t choose to leave. Not yet, at least.”

He eyed her pensively, then, “Take my hand, Ryoko. We’re not going to stay on Heiwa any longer. If you want to come with me and risk your safety, then that’s your choice. But I won’t put Heiwa under any more threat, so we’re going to take a trip across space.”

“A trip?” Ryoko eyed him doubtfully. “Do you mean you’re going to teleport us? In your condition? Are you nuts? I never let anyone mess around with my molecules.”

“But you don’t know where we’re going. Only I know how to get to the planet where I confronted Washu before.” Zakari said sensibly. “It’s deserted and there’s no one there to kill if I should accidentally implode it. It’s quicker and safer than taking my spaceship — remember, time is of the essence, and my ship’s hyperspace drive is more likely to upset my body than a brief flit through space under my own steam... I learnt that coming back from my encounter with Washu-san. Besides, you might be strong, but I doubt you can teleport across whole galaxies. You’re just not capable of wielding that kind of power. If you were, you’d be in my situation, too.”

“I guess you have a point.” Ryoko gazed down at her hands, then she sighed. “I suppose I’ll just have to trust that you know what you’re doing, then. But once we get to this abandoned rock of yours, well, then I’m going to call Ryo Ohki to come meet us. All right?”

“All right.” Zakari said reluctantly. “Though if I hurt her, Ryoko...”

“Ryo Ohki has regenerative capabilities. Unless by some fluke you broke her power gem, she can’t easily be killed.” Ryoko shook her head.

“Then why were you so concerned about her?” Zakari looked startled. “When you first came round after our fight, you yelled at me like crazy because I’d stunned her!”

“Because Ryo Ohki can feel pain, you know.” Ryoko snapped back. “She might be part mechanical but she’s part organic and she has feelings and thoughts of her own. She’s my sister — we’re connected psychically, and when she’s hurt, I can feel it too. You frightened her, when you attacked — her fear was so strong it almost paralysed me, also. That’s why. Ryo Ohki’s not a machine either, Zakari. Of all people, I thought you might understand that.”

Zakari stared at her, taking in the look of hurt and anger on his companion’s features. Then he sighed.

“I’m sorry. You’re right.” He said contritely. “It didn’t occur to me, but you’re right.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Ryoko told him curtly.

“Are we leaving, then?”

“One second.” Ryoko nodded. “I just have something I need to retrieve from the lab first, that’s all.”

“Something?” Zakari stared at her. “Like what?”

“Nothing that concerns you. Something that I need, that’s all.” Ryoko shrugged. “Hang on just two ticks — I’ll be back before you know it.”

Before he could react, she was gone, and Zakari sighed, folding his arms across his chest as he waited. Impatience and apprehension swirled within him, mingling with the flickers of dark energy, and he sighed, biting his lip as he contemplated his chances of teleporting them both safely across space.

“But I have to, so that rules out any room for doubt.” He muttered. “Ryoko might be crazy, or very naïve, thinking that this Washu person might be able to help me. I’m still not at all sure about trusting that woman, and I’m still going to be on my guard around her. If I need to kill her, well, then I still will, no matter what Ryoko thinks about it. If I discover Washu Hakubi was involved in my enslavement, then I’ll make an even trade and sacrifice her life along with my own. But...”

He faltered, his brows knitting together as he contemplated.

“But if she wasn’t involved, and if Clay worked on his own, then maybe I shouldn’t be hasty.” He added slowly. “If Washu did build Ryoko, and managed to stabilise her life energy so easily, it seems strange that she should have failed with me. I’m confused about what it all means, but I suppose the scientist in me is going to see it through to the end. Whatever that end is.”

The call of his name alerted him to the fact his companion had returned and he met her gaze, a slight smile touching his lips as he made his way across the stone to join her.

“Still, at least it’s nice to have someone who doesn’t consider me a monster, even though she knows who I am.” He acknowledged. “I only hope I’m not going to wind up hurting her for placing that trust in me.”

“Aren’t you coming? I thought we were on a deadline!” Ryoko’s quizzical tones broke through his reverie and he nodded, quickening his pace and grasping her firmly around the wrists as he focused his energy on transferring them both to the small abandoned outpost where he had laid his trap for Washu. As they re-materialised in the planetoid’s dusty atmosphere, wild flickers of whiteish magic flared up around his arms and Ryoko pulled away from him with an exclamation, sending a forcefield up around herself as she did so.

“Watch what you’re doing with that.” She scolded him. “I’m on your side, remember? And this body is far too beautiful to be chargrilled.”

“I’m sorry.” Zakari looked troubled. “I didn’t mean to. But transferring us...”

“Oh, stop it.” Ryoko shook her head. “I was trying to lighten the mood.”

She offered him a slight smile.

“It’s not often I meet someone who’s more out of control than I am, that’s for sure.” She added complacently. “It’s quite a change. Washu is always calling me emotionally unstable, and it really bugs me. But I guess it’s better to be that than physically unstable. Considering.”

“Trust me, you don’t know how lucky you are.” Zakari told her ruefully, as with a tremendous effort he managed to quell the flaring light. “It leaves you none too sane, this magic, either. When it washes over me, I’m not really in control of anything.”

“Well, if you are somehow part Kii, like me, I guess that follows.” Ryoko looked pensive. “Kii magic makes you a bit nuts, if you go by

my mother and her dotty sister... Hey!"

She frowned, looked thoughtful, and Zakari shot her a sidelong glance.

"What?"

"Her sister." Ryoko muttered. "I should have... maybe that explains why your science is so full of holes. Clay worked for Washu's sister, Tokimi — and he did so for a very long time. She was as mad as a hatter while the magic ran through her — who knows what she made him do. Washu would never make a flawed specimen if she could help it — she'd rather die. She's rough on *my* flaws, and between you and me, I don't think I have all that many! But Tokimi... Tokimi and Clay... I think I've solved the missing link in the chain!"

"I'm glad you have. I'm still in the dark." Zakari pursed his lips. "Tokimi... who is Tokimi? And what magic... what are you talking about?"

"Washu's adoptive sister. Tokimi, the last Priestess of Kihaku — before it was destroyed." Ryoko settled herself on the rough terrain, pulling him down beside her and shooting him a companionable smile. "Down here. You're meant to be conserving that energy, after all. Anyhow, I don't understand all of the science, and I honestly don't care. All I know is that Tokimi was under some kind of... I suppose you'd call it a spell, and it made her a bit crackers. She started trying to kill people — with my Tenchi right at the top of her hitlist. Clay was her agent — when he died, he was still in her service. Don't you think it's possible he made you from a piece of her? I mean, Tokimi doesn't know the first thing about science, and Clay was a plagiarising moron who couldn't even clamp a robot together without ripping ideas from someone else. Right?"

"I see." Zakari's brow creased. "I didn't know Washu had such a sister. Clay mentions no Tokimi in his notes."

"I guess he wouldn't. If you believe Yume — I mean, Zero — he was frightened of her and what she could do." Ryoko shrugged. "After all, I wouldn't want someone with the kind of power she had — or well, *you* have — on a rampage against me. It would be messy. I don't do messy. Not if I can help it."

"You think that its likely, then?"

"I think it might be. In which case, you're going after Washu on completely misdirected grounds." Ryoko sighed. "But either way, we'll know soon. I've just sent out a call to my ship... to Ryo Ohki. She

heard me, and she's on her way. She'll follow my thought patterns, now we have a coherent connection. I don't know what it is about that lab of Clay's, or if it's that awful Heiwan atmosphere. But I couldn't keep a continuous link to her there, even without the cuffs on. Here she's much clearer in the back of my mind. I know she'll come."

"And she'll bring Washu with her?" Zakari asked softly. Ryoko nodded.

"Washu is with her now." She agreed. Zakari frowned, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

"I see. Good." He said quietly. "I'm glad about that."

"I hope you're not going to make a second attempt on my mother's life." Ryoko said warningly. "My goodwill towards you will run out very fast, if you do. I mean it."

"You still call her mother. Do you really feel that strongly towards her?" Zakari eyed his companion quizzically, and Ryoko sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"If I knew how she viewed me, I'd answer that." She said at length. "But I guess there are times all girls need a mother to look up to. Even space pirates like me."

She sent him a crooked smile, and despite himself, Zakari found himself returning it.

"If you tell her that, I'll deny it." She added, the impish sparkle back in her golden eyes. "But it's true nonetheless. She's part of my family, and even if she is a crazy, I don't want her killed. So keep your explosions to yourself for a while, huh? If everything works out as I hope, nobody need die at all. And I can go home and sleep in my bed — or even better, Tenchi's bed — without worrying my head over some unsuspecting planetary population somewhere in the depths of space."

"You really aren't any kind of an assassin, are you?"

"Nope, not me." Ryoko shook her head. She shrugged. "I told you. Messy. Not my thing."

She paused, then offered him a more serious smile.

"I don't want you to die either, as it happens." She said lightly. "Because I've not ever met anyone quite like me before, and it's been nice to know I wasn't the only one. I mean, even though it's been rough on you, and all — I still think it's nice to know. You know. That you exist too."

“I agree.” Zakari leant back on his elbows, gazing up at the stars that glittered high above them. “You’re not like anyone I’ve met before either, Ryoko — but you’re a revelation all the same. Washusan should be happy about how you turned out. She has a lot of things to be proud of.”

“Maybe she does.” Ryoko said reflectively. “But I doubt she’ll ever acknowledge it.”

She shrugged her shoulders, settling herself more comfortably on the ground.

“Oh well. I guess that’s just life, isn’t it. You win some, you lose some.”

“You really don’t know how true that is.” Zakari sighed, gazing at the tongues of translucent energy that lapped at the edges of his nails. “I suppose all we can do is wait and see just what it has in store for us next.”

“You look so apprehensive.”

“I’m not sure how much longer I can keep the flares under wraps.” Zakari admitted. “It might be better if you seek cover — at least, keep your distance from me. Just in case.”

“That does destroy the point of not being scared of you.”

“No, but Ryoko, I’ve seen one woman hurt because of my curse.” Zakari said flatly. “Don’t let me see another one struck down... all right?”

Ryoko stared at him for a moment. Then she smiled, nodding her head as her amber eyes softened with comprehension.

“I understand.” She agreed quietly. “But I won’t be far away. And I will be watching, so make sure you don’t do anything crazy. All right?”

Zakari did not respond, watching as she flickered and blurred out of view, settling herself down on the roof of one of the abandoned military buildings to wait. He sighed heavily, turning his gaze back towards the skyline.

“I hope she’s right about this.” He muttered. “And that they arrive soon. I’m getting more unsteady by the minute — it may already be too late.”

“Woah, Ryo Ohki!”

Washu stumbled, almost losing her footing as the spaceship suddenly lurched between her, sending Tenchi tumbling to the floor as she veered suddenly off at an angle, letting out a series of earsplitting calls as she did so. Across the other side of the ship, Yume shrieked, grabbing hold of the navigation panel and gripping it tightly, struggling to right herself as the craft showed no sign of slowing down.

“Ryo Ohki, can you give me some warning when you’re going to do that?” Tenchi asked plaintively. “I thought you only swerved like that when Ryoko was piloting, but I guess you don’t need her to break the speed limit.”

“What’s gotten into you?” Washu murmured, as Ryo Ohki’s reflection glittered in and out of the hovering crystals above her head. “What is it, Ryo Ohki? Have you made a connection with Ryoko — is that it? Do you think you know where she is?”

Ryo Ohki emitted a joyful yowl, the crystals glowing and hovering towards her pro-tem pilot as she did so, and Tenchi gazed up at them in hope, scrambling to his feet.

“Ryoko?” He repeated. “Washu, is that what she’s found? Is that why she suddenly hared off course like that?”

“I think so, though I can’t communicate with her so easily when we’re in flight.” Washu turned, shrugging her shoulders. “It’s the only thing I can think of, though, that would explain such a complete turnaround in her demeanour. She’s been sluggish and depressed ever since we left the Earth — now she’s going faster than even Ryoko at her most wild would probably choose to pilot her — I only hope she can keep it up. With the damage she sustained on the moon, I’m not sure that she’s quite as streamlined as she usually is.”

“So long as we don’t hit anything, that’s all I ask.” Yume put in, casting her mentor a rueful smile. “I may be discovering yet another brand new human sensation, Washu — I feel distinctly disorientated.”

“It’s the speed at which we’re travelling. It’s probably upsetting your circuits.” Washu told her with a grin. “Although if you want to think of it as space-sickness, be my guest. Sit down, Yume... just relax. I can’t make Ryo Ohki go any slower, because I don’t have Ryoko’s control. And the poor girl is obviously in quite a frenzy — so I guess that she must have picked up Ryoko’s vibe.”

“We’re heading back towards that same sector of space again. The place we were when that man attacked you.” Yume glanced up at the navigation screen, shielding her eyes from the glare of a nearby star as

they whipped by its range. “Maybe Ryoko was there all the time.”

“If she had been, wouldn’t Ryo Ohki have sensed her before, when we went there?” Tenchi asked.

“Good point.” Yume sighed. “I guess my circuits are scrambled. Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Tenchi dropped down beside her, shooting her a warm grin. “Do as Washu says... Ryo Ohki is going at a pace, and I’m not sure I’m all that steady, either. If it wasn’t for the fact that Ryoko is probably at the end of this mad zip across space, I’d probably be sprawled out on the deck by now.”

“Do you think she’s in danger?” Yume raised her gaze to Washu, who frowned, shrugging her shoulders.

“Hard to say. If that Z guy is with her, yes.” She said simply. “Even if he isn’t attacking her, Yume, he’s still a threat to her life.”

“Well, I guess we’ll soon find out.” Yume sighed, closing her eyes. “When we get there.”

Ryo Ohki let out an apologetic yowl, and Washu smiled.

“It’s all right, Ryo Ohki. You do what you have to — we don’t have time to waste.” She said gently, patting the control panel. “Never mind those wimps. You know where Ryoko is, don’t you? That’s where we’ve got to go. Don’t worry about Tenchi and Yume. Just follow the trail.”

Ryo Ohki’s crystals glittered than flared red at this, as the ship seemed to get her second wind, and Washu nodded approvingly.

“We really are entering that sector. Yume, you’re right.” She observed. “I think I can see the unique pattern of stars right up ahead.”

“That looks familiar to me, too.” Yume scrambled onto all fours, peering out into the darkness as at long last Ryo Ohki’s pace steadied. “Oh, thank goodness! Ryo Ohki, I didn’t know you could go so fast as that!”

“Why has she slowed down?” Tenchi wondered, coming to stand at Washu’s side as he gazed out across the approaching solar system. “Is there danger? Is it a trap? Or is it... something else?”

“Look.” Washu extended a finger, pointing ahead of them. “Do you see the light coming from that planet down there? That’s where we’re going. And that’s Z’s magic — I’d bet my reputation on it. It’s flaring

— but whether it's flaring to threaten Ryoko, or just of its own accord, I don't know."

"Going into it would be dangerous, if it engulfs the planet." Yume looked anxious. "Can we even think about landing, in light of that?"

"We have to land." Tenchi said firmly. "After that race through space, Ryo Ohki needs to take a break. And we won't find Ryoko if we hang about up here. If he's down there, she must be too. Even if he has made her lure Ryo Ohki into a trap, we have to go in."

"I couldn't put it better myself." Washu said grimly. "Okay, Ryo Ohki. Let's go into land... whatever we might find, we've got to get Ryoko away from Z before it's too late."

Ryo Ohki howled her agreement, careening down towards the planet's surface with dogged determination. As she hovered above the scorched landscape, beaming the three travellers down onto the sand below, Washu squinted across the skyline, hunting for any sign of life. From the air, she realised, Z's glinting flares of magic had been easily visible. But now, at normal street level, he could be concealed once more by buildings or debris that dotted the horizon, and she frowned.

"He's going to be harder to find from down here, isn't he?" Yume came up beside her, voicing her thoughts aloud, and Washu nodded grimly.

"But we have Ryo Ohki to help." She reminded her companion, turning to hold out her arm to the ship. Ryo Ohki mewed, glimmering as she transformed into her mammal form, leaping up onto Washu's shoulder and settling herself comfortably against the scientist's neck. Yume smiled.

"So we do." She agreed. "Well, Ryo Ohki? Can you still feel Ryoko?"

Ryo Ohki squealed, her amber eyes glittering with anticipation as she nodded her head. Despite the creature's evident exhaustion, Washu was aware of the impatience in her small companion's demeanour, and she frowned, lifting a hand to brush her fingers gently against Ryo Ohki's gemstone. A whirl of colours and images flashed through her thoughts, and then, somewhere deep in the darkness of Ryo Ohki's buzzing memory, she caught a faint whisper of energy. Her eyes widened.

"Ryoko." She murmured, turning to face the old military barracks. "She's here all right. Ryo Ohki's got her in her sights — and very strongly, too. I can't break through their communication, so I don't

know what's being said between them. But I know that Ryo Ohki's got a lock on her thought patterns and I think she can lead us to what we're looking for. Ryo Ohki, don't be afraid to nudge me if I take a wrong turn, okay? I think I got a sense of where Ryoko is from your thought patterns, but I'm not as good at this telepathy game as the two of you."

"That way, huh?" Tenchi cast his gaze along the horizon. "I don't see anyone... you'd think that, if Ryoko wanted us here, she'd be around to meet us."

"If it's not a trap." Yume said apprehensively. "And she wasn't forced to bring Ryo Ohki here."

"I don't think so." Washu shook her head. "Ryo Ohki's excited but she's not tense. She's not worried about Ryoko's safety. You have to remember that whatever Ryoko might conceal in her facial expressions and tone of voice, she'd probably not be able to shield entirely from her thoughts. Ryo Ohki would know if she was afraid."

"I suppose we should take that as a good sign." Tenchi said reflectively. "You said it was that way. Are we going?"

"We are." Washu nodded resolutely. "Z's flares were getting worse, and I'm not sure how stable he is. Be cautious. And Tenchi, it might be that we call on your magic again, so be aware."

"I don't know if I can switch it on like that." Tenchi looked startled. "I only could before because your life was in danger, and when I came between you and him, my body reacted the same way as it did against Kagato or against the flare of energy Seiryō sent towards Mihoshi when we were his prisoners. I'm not sure I can count on it when I want it... it doesn't work like that."

"Well, you might have to chance it, Tenchi-kun." Yume said grimly, raising her hand to gesture ahead of her, and Washu turned, biting her lip as she registered the fact that the empty plain before them was no longer empty. Zakari stood before them, white flickers dancing around his body as he watched them approach, and Washu eyed his impassive expression, pursing her lips as she struggled to read his motives.

"I didn't get a chance to appraise him before he attacked me the last time." She muttered to herself. "But even if I had, could I piece him together? He seems agitated and confused — but about what? I'm not sure what to make of him at all."

"You shouldn't come any closer." At length Zakari spoke, holding up his hands, and white bolts of energy flared out from his fingers,

singing dark marks into the sandy ground as he did so. Yume let out an exclamation, taking a step back, and Washu frowned, aware that Ryo Ohki had dropped low on her shoulder, her tattered ears flattened against her head as she too assessed their companion.

“Where is my daughter?” She asked quietly, as the silence threatened to become overwhelming. “We know she’s here, so don’t tell us that she isn’t, Z. I told you before that I wanted her back. What you’re doing is madness. You must know that all you can do is hurt her, if you continue like this. Her and other people around you.”

Zakari did not respond, and Washu registered the faint glittering of his left eye once more, as he surveyed each one of them.

“Zero.” He murmured softly. “I was right. It was you I saw. You hide your true self, but I still recognise your face.”

“And I yours, now Washu has located the memory within me.” Yume said levelly. “Stop this, Z. What Clay did to you was wrong, and I’m sorry for my part in it. But I’ve left my life with him in the past, and so must you. Ryoko’s done nothing to you, and you shouldn’t involve her in something that isn’t her fight.”

“You had better not have hurt my fiancée.” Tenchi added, his hand tightening around the hilt of his sword and the blade flared into life at his secure touch. “I’m not a violent person, but I won’t have harm come to her. Whatever axe you think you have to grind — you should have kept her out of it.”

“I want to know one thing.” Zakari said quietly. “Washu Hakubi, tell me honestly, and know that I will recognise a lie as soon as you speak it. Did you charge Clay with creating me? Are you the one responsible for my existence? Tell me, and tell me now.”

“I didn’t even know Clay had done more than manufacture Zero.” Washu said succinctly. “I might have birthed Ryoko in a laboratory, and I won’t pretend I didn’t. But I didn’t know you existed and I certainly had nothing to do with it. Even from this distance I can tell your body is unstable — that’s bad science and whatever else I am, I am not careless with my work. Please, give me some credit for perfectionism. I would never have created someone like you.”

Zakari’s eyes narrowed at this, and the white light intensified around his aura. Tenchi frowned, raising his sword.

“Don’t even think about hurting Washu again.” He warned. “You know already that I can stop your magic, and I will again, if you try. So you might as well not bother.”

“Tenchi, put the sword away.”

At that moment Ryoko flickered into view, dropping down gracefully onto the ground between Zakari and his opponents. She set herself neatly in front of her would-be kidnapper, and as Washu shot her a startled glance, Ryo Ohki leapt down to the ground, bounding across the landscape towards her mistress. Ryoko laughed, bending to scoop the small ball of chocolate fur up in her hands, and Ryo Ohki rubbed happily up against the pirate’s fingers, licking them liberally before jumping up onto her shoulder.

“You were a good girl.” She murmured. “Coming when I called you. I’m sorry I worried you... I know you must have been scared.”

“Ryoko?” Tenchi stared at his fiancée in consternation, disbelief in his brown eyes as his grip on his weapon faltered. “What do you mean, put it away? You can’t... are you... what are you saying?”

“I’m saying nobody is going to fight.” Ryoko stepped forward, putting her hands gently on Tenchi’s shoulders. “You should understand, Tenchi. You’re the one who likes to look for the peaceful solutions if you can. Listen to me. I don’t want you to fight him.”

“But... he kidnapped you!” Tenchi protested. “He abducted you... didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did.” Ryoko agreed, turning to send Zakari a pensive glance. “But really, Tenchi, trust me, will you? He couldn’t fight another battle, even if you goaded him into it. All it would do is blow up this world and probably all of us, too. He’s unstable — very unstable. He hasn’t got the control over his magic to prevent a disaster — it’s taking him everything he has right now not to send out huge waves of energy.”

“Ryoko.” Washu eyed her daughter in wonder, and Ryoko spread her hands.

“I asked Ryo Ohki to bring you here because I want your help, Washu.” She said evenly, releasing her grip on the bemused Prince’s shoulders and approaching her mother decidedly. “Zakari was Clay’s creation. He was to Clay what I am to you — his weapon. But Clay messed up — and Zakari is going to die if nothing is done. He took me prisoner, true enough, but he never intended to hurt me. And he hasn’t. Not really.”

“I can’t say the same.” Washu said quietly. “He would have killed me, if Tenchi had not intervened.”

“Well, it keeps you on your toes. I thought you were used to death

threats by now.” Ryoko said flippantly.

“Maybe, but that doesn’t usually endear me to helping someone.”

“You seem only too happy to help Tokimi or Seiryō Tennan.” Ryoko said pragmatically. “Listen to me, all right? You’re probably the only person smart enough to do anything about Zakari’s condition, if anyone even can. He’s already hurt people without meaning to, and we both know that if nothing is done, this magic will flare up and kill him. It could take out this planet, or even more planets — we don’t know how much damage it could do, or how many people it could kill. He came after you simply because he thought you were the one to blame for everything he’s been through, and some of it I understand. I’ve never had to face my mortality, but I do know how it feels to wonder if you’re just someone else’s puppet. So I want you to help him. If for no other reason than you owe it to me to do it.”

“Owe it to you?”

“For all the years I grew up not knowing if I had a mother.” Ryoko said frankly. “Right up to today.”

“Ryoko.” Tenchi held out his hand to her, and with a smile the pirate took it, squeezing it tightly.

“You understand, don’t you, Tenchi?” She murmured. “He’s one like me. I can’t... can’t just walk away and let him die, because he’s one like me.”

“I think so.” Tenchi nodded. “But Ryoko, I was so worried about you. You know that, don’t you? I was frightened... I didn’t know if you were all right.”

“Well, now you know I am.” Ryoko told him with a smile. “And I’m glad to see you, Tenchi-kun. More than you know.”

“Ryoko called you Zakari.” Yume took a hesitant step forward, eying their companion with curious eyes. “You called yourself Z, when you spoke to us. Which are you? Really? Zakari or Z?”

“Which are you? Yume or Zero?” Zakari countered. “Ryoko has told me about you, and your reprogramming. It must be convenient, to have such a mind... a mind which can forget and change enough to adapt to anything and everything.”

“We were both creations of and prisoners of Clay’s will.” Yume said softly, holding up her hands in a gesture of peace. “And if Washu will help you to overcome his influence, I will do all I can to assist her. I owe you a debt for the things that went before, if nothing else. Washu,

I think Ryoko is right... and that we should do as she says.”

“Yume?” Washu stared at the robot, not comprehending, and Yume offered her a faint smile.

“Playing God with DNA began this whole mess. In a way, you are guilty.” She said quietly. “Clay did steal your notes, after all. Ryoko might have been your direct project, but both Z and I are indirectly here because of your work. Ryoko is right. You *do* owe it... not just to her, but to yourself. You said you didn’t want to be responsible for the death of another planet, after Kihaku died. Well, if you do nothing now, you might well be. He’s dangerous — you know it as well as I do. You might be able to stop the inevitable — can you really stand back and let a man die?”

Before Washu could answer, Zakari let out a cry of pain, dropping to the ground as flares of white magic ripped across his body, dancing and flickering upwards like tongues of electric flame. His fingers clawed the ground, as if trying to restrain the power from within him, beads of perspiration forming on his brow as he fought tooth and nail against the magic’s will.

“You should leave this place. Leave me. All of you. Now.” He gasped out. “I can’t hold it any longer... it’s too late. It’s too... too late.”

“No it isn’t. Stop being a wimp and get a grip on yourself.” Ryoko instructed, pulling away from Tenchi’s grasp as she flickered out of view, re-materialising inches from her fallen companion. “We’re not doing the dramatic death scene just yet... so hang on in there.”

“Ryoko, get away from him!” Washu exclaimed, alarm flooding her green eyes as she registered how true Zakari’s words had been. “He’s right — it’s getting stronger! He’s going to blast you to pieces if you don’t get back here... don’t let him hurt you!”

“I spent a lifetime avoiding Galaxy Police blasters. I think I can handle a little power surge.” Ryoko said frankly, gripping Zakari around the wrist and fumbling in the folds of her gown, grinning in triumph as she found what she was looking for. Something glittered in the light of Zakari’s growing flare, and Ryoko set her teeth, fumbling with her prize as she focused her attention on Zakari’s arms.

“Ryoko!” Tenchi exclaimed, but Ryoko took no notice, repeating the curious gesture with Zakari’s other wrist. She drew a deep breath into her lungs, grasping him tightly around both arms at once, and then releasing her grip. As she did so, the flares of light began to flicker and die away, and Zakari dropped heavily to the ground, his

breath coming in uneven gasps as he struggled to bring his body back under some form of control.

“What the...?” Washu darted forward, and Ryoko turned, meeting her gaze with a playful one of her own.

“Prison cuffs.” She said simply. “Clay used them to restrain him, when he was a prisoner at the lab. And he used them to prevent me from using my magic. I don’t know whether they can hold Zakari’s strength indefinitely, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to try. And if we’re going to take him back to the Earth, we need to do something to keep it under wraps. So I thought... well... why not?”

“Well, well. There is some of me in you after all.” Washu’s eyes flickered with amusement, and she rested a warm hand on her daughter’s shoulder, gazing down at the collapsed form on the ground beneath them. “That was sharp thinking. I’m almost surprised you came up with the idea on your own.”

“Thanks.” Ryoko grimaced at her. “You will help him, won’t you, Washu? He might have gone nuts and done some crazy things, but I don’t want him to kill himself. He’s not really bad — just messed up.”

Washu frowned, then she nodded her head.

“Yume spoke the truth.” She agreed, dropping down at Zakari’s side and placing a finger to his throat, feeling the man’s racing pulse beneath his skin. “This is indirectly my fault, and my problem to fix. So I’m game to try. I don’t know if I will succeed, but at least if I bring him to my sub-space lab, any disasters shouldn’t affect the Earth. So I *will* try. Especially if it means that much to you, Ryoko.”

“I think that Tokimi might have ordered Clay to create him. His magic is extreme, rather like hers was.” Ryoko said pensively. “Do you think that’s possible?”

“It’s very possible. In fact, it’s more than likely.” Washu agreed, brushing sweat-damp wisps of Zakari’s hair out of his face. “He’s lost consciousness. He really was fighting it as hard as he could just now, wasn’t he? That’s why it hasn’t engulfed him sooner. He’s been battling it with all his strength.”

“More so since he had me around.” Ryoko acknowledged. “I promised him I wouldn’t fight him again, but even when he released me, I couldn’t just leave. He might have killed people — or worse, blown up a planet and unlocked another mad demon for us to deal with. I wasn’t willing to risk it. I couldn’t reach Ryo Ohki very easily from Heiwa — that’s where Clay had his lab, and where Zakari first

took me. But here, it was much easier to get in touch with her.”

She cast the unconscious man a glance, then,

“I think he wanted help more than anything.” She added reflectively. “It was nice to know there’s someone out there with a more messed up background than I have.”

“It might be a common background, you know.” Washu said heavily. “It seems likely that Clay stole genetic samples from my secret lab to create this project of his, Ryoko. Kagato’s gene material, to be exact.”

“You mean... he might be my *brother*?” Ryoko stared at her mother in shock, and Washu shrugged.

“It’s possible.” She agreed cautiously. “Not for sure, but maybe.”

“Perhaps that’s why I felt so determined to help him, then.” Ryoko sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever felt quite so protective over someone before. It wasn’t the same as when I’m helping Tenchi — Tenchi is stronger than I am, and he sure doesn’t need my protection most of the time. But this guy... there was something else about him. He needed me to stay. So I did. That’s all.”

“We should get him aboard Ryo Ohki, and get going.”

Tenchi’s voice interrupted the conversation at that moment, and Washu glanced up, nodding her head.

“We should.” She agreed. “Then I can take samples and see what I can come up with. It’s going to be a long night’s work, even with Yume’s help. But I’ll do my best to try, Ryoko. You have my word on that. I’ll do my best to save his life, if I possibly can.”

“Thank you.” Ryoko’s eyes glittered briefly with gratitude and relief, then she offered her mother a smile. “I really don’t want to battle another Yugi any time soon.”

“I’d like to just go home and get ready to celebrate my birthday, without worrying about imploding planets or unstable projects of Clay’s.” Tenchi admitted. “Ryoko, I’m glad you wanted to help him — and I do understand why you did things the way you did. But I’m more glad that he didn’t self combust before we got to you. It was a big risk you took, you know. It might have cost you.”

“Perhaps.” Ryoko acknowledged. “I guess I just trusted my pirate luck. Nothing’s managed to kill me so far... I figured there was a good chance this wouldn’t be the time, either. And I was right. So all’s well, and all that.”

“Now that sounds more like my daughter.” Washu’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “All right, Ryo Ohki. Now you and Ryoko are reunited, it should be a smoother trip back to the Earth. Whenever you’re ready — let’s go home.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

“Zakari?”

Ryoko pushed back the door of the laboratory, stepping carefully through the cluttered equipment to the makeshift pallet that stood in one corner. For a moment she hesitated, then she moved closer, running her gaze over the still figure that lay atop it. Despite herself she smiled, taking in Yume’s blanket covering his body, and the peaceful expression on his face. It was the next day, and true to her word, Washu had brought the stricken scientist into the relative seclusion of her lab, working through the night as she sought to find a solution to his unstable genetic structure. As she eyed his sleeping form, Ryoko realised that the night’s endeavour had not been easy on him, either, and she felt a pang of compassion for the man who lay before her.

“Even if you’re not my brother.” She murmured. “I’m glad I could help. I guess Tenchi’s had more influence on me than I thought possible — but it’s a nice feeling, all the same.”

“He’ll sleep for a while longer, Ryoko.” Washu’s voice came from behind her and she turned, offering her mother a pensive look.

“Did you manage to fix him?” She asked quietly. Washu nodded her head.

“At the expense of his magic, yes.” She agreed gravely. “Or at least, most of it. There’s still a modicum left — but his biology wasn’t at all stable. It’s a wonder he’s been able to control the flares as well as he has for so long, to be honest. Either way, although I’ve repaired the instability, he has a lot of healing to do, still, and we need to make sure he rests so long as he’s here with us. The magic left its mark in many places. By rights he should already be dead — I’m rather impressed by the fact that he isn’t. I guess it must be the Kii in him — or his own strength of will.”

“A bit of both, I guess.” Ryoko said thoughtfully, her expression uncharacteristically pensive as she gazed back at her sleeping companion. “So he is Kii, then? You’re certain that he does have Tokimi’s genetics?”

“Yes and no.” Washu slipped a hand into her daughter’s, leading

her carefully across the lab to Yume's abandoned pallet and sitting down, indicating for her companion to join her. "I did identify a Kii gene structure, and it would be consistent with my sister's tribe. Also, I'm fairly sure that he has elements of Kii sight — at least, that's my impression of that left eye of his. From the way he saw Zero's true identity through her facade and read Tenchi's Juraian spirit suggests he can see far deeper into people than your average person. On balance, I think that it's likely Clay used Tokimi's DNA in some part at least. She was the last of her people, after all — the last survivor of the Inoue tribe. It couldn't belong to anyone else."

"So that does explain why he wasn't hurt by Heiwa's sun, just like me." Ryoko reflected, glancing at her hands. "I called it right. Guess there's some of you in me after all, huh?"

"Yes, but Tokimi's is not the only genetic signature within Z's body." Washu shook her head. "There is at least one other, but it's been so badly mangled by my procedures and his own molecular crises that I haven't been able to identify it definitively. Suffice it to say it came from a very powerful individual, but I can't make out whether it comes from Juraian or Arian stock. And I can't pull an exact code to match it to anyone in particular. It's true that Clay stole Kagato's genetic material from my lab, but it's not for sure that he used it in this particular experiment. So although I'm pretty sure Tokimi provided the maternal DNA, I can't be sure if Kagato provided the paternal side of the equation."

"Meaning you don't know whether or not he is my brother." Ryoko said quietly. Washu nodded.

"I'm afraid that's the case." She agreed. "I'm sorry. I get the feeling it mattered to you, whether he was or he wasn't."

"I'm not sure." Ryoko looked pensive. "I've never thought about it before. But I'm glad to know that it wasn't you behind his creation, Washu. I know you're nuts, and I've been mad at you enough times for what you did bringing me into the world. But I realise there's a difference between his birth and mine. You did at least take the time to do the job properly. I didn't think sloppy science was your style — but I'm glad that I was right."

"Z's body was a mess." Washu inclined her head slightly. "And I'm glad you realise that I'm too much of a perfectionist to settle for something like that."

"His name is *Zakari*, Washu." Ryoko met her mother's eyes with serious golden ones. "Just like mine is Ryoko. Don't call him Z. He's

not a machine, and nor am I.”

“I’m sorry.” Washu looked taken aback, then she smiled. “I suppose you’re right. He is a man, after all. Not a weapon. Especially now I’ve mended his body. Clay isn’t here to hurt him any more, so I suppose he has a chance to be Zakari now.”

“He was always Zakari.” Ryoko shook her head. “From the moment he first drew breath. We are alive... maybe sometimes people like you and Clay forget that little detail. When you create something alive, well, it is just that. Alive.”

“What do you think of me, Ryoko?” Washu asked softly, and Ryoko started, staring at her mother in consternation.

“How do you mean?”

“Do you really view me as this detached little egghead who pokes and prods but never gets involved in the things she works on?”

“You want me to answer that?” Ryoko arched an eyebrow. “Honestly?”

“Ryoko.” Washu sighed, shaking her head slowly. “Sometimes kids can be so cruel.”

“I’m not exactly a kid.”

“You are to me. You’re my kid.” Washu spread her hands. “Like it or not, that’s just how it is.”

“Am I, though?” Ryoko kicked back onto the pallet, leaning up against the wall as she eyed her companion warily. “I meant what I said the other night. About not being able to have it both ways. I can’t be your project and your daughter. It’s too confusing for me, and I don’t know where you’re coming from. I want to know, once and for all, where I stand. You’re always deflecting people and playing games — it frustrates everyone, but me most of all. I deal with things directly, you know that. For once, do you think you could come down to my level and speak to me without being flippant or offhand? I’d like to know the truth... and I think, in some respects, I’m entitled to know how my own mother views me.”

She paused, narrowing her eyes slightly.

“After all, when Zakari levelled accusations at your name, I wasn’t able to completely refute them” She added. “Because I didn’t honestly know if what he said was true or if it wasn’t. And even given our history, it shouldn’t be that way. Our family situation might not be the charming little scenario Tenchi’s was when Achika was alive. But it

doesn't mean you can't be honest with me. I'm getting sick of the mixed messages. It's just not fair."

Washu eyed her companion thoughtfully for a moment. Then, very carefully, she slipped her hand into her gown, pulling out the dog-eared photograph she had retrieved from the Science Academy, and the golden chain that had slept so long within the secret vault at the back of her laboratory. Without a word, she set them down on the mattress between them, and confusion flooded Ryoko's expression as she reached out a tentative finger to touch the medallion.

"I've seen this before." She murmured. "When you went to Kihaku with Sasami, you took it with you."

"Yes." Washu agreed softly. "I did. And you're right, you know. Both Tenchi and Yume have told me that I can't expect you to understand where I come from if I don't bother to point you in the right direction. We all have defence strategies, after all. To protect ourselves. You yell and scream and blow things up. I push them away, and deflect, just as you said. It's the only way I've managed to live this long without completely losing my grip on sanity."

"Some people might question that fact." Ryoko said archly. "All right, I'll bite. What has an old photo and a broken piece of gold got to do with you and I?"

Washu hesitated for a moment, then she touched the edge of the picture gently.

"Mikamo Niwase." She said quietly. "A former colleague of mine at the Science Academy, but more importantly, the man who headed the project on Jurai, when I was involved in working with those gems... the Dark Heart."

"All right." Ryoko nodded. "So he was involved with Kagato... so what?"

"Everyone else involved in that project died or went mad or something of that nature." Washu said pensively. "Mikamo among them."

She sighed, and Ryoko was aware of genuine pain in her mother's green eyes.

"Mikamo and I were planning a future together, when Kagato's schemes intervened." She added sadly. "You have to understand that if it hadn't been for our relationship, I don't think either of us would even have been on Jurai. He was the son of a rich family, who didn't approve of me at all. So we planned to elope — and Jurai was

somewhere we could pursue our bond in secret, without the interference of his people or the Academy. When it ended, we were going to disappear — get married, and start anew. That was our plan. That was what we hoped for. And I would have given up everything — even my science — to make it come true.”

“*Washu!*” Ryoko’s eyes became wide with surprise, and she scooped up the picture, eying it with new eyes. “So Tenchi was right. You did lose someone... someone important!”

“I did.” Washu nodded, closing her eyes briefly against the tears that glittered in the depths of her eyes. “Kagato’s jewels had a bad effect on Mikamo’s mind. I don’t know how, exactly, but I know he was exposed to their magic in some way that the rest of us were not. It troubled him — he had bad dreams, and he began to forget things — or act confused. I was worried about him — of course I was. But I didn’t make the full connection then. I thought maybe it was our relationship that had added too much pressure to his already busy life. Little did I know.”

She sighed, spreading her hands.

“One morning, he called me out to meet him.” She continued, her words careful and even but Ryoko’s ears were sharp enough to pick up the occasional falter in her tones. “He was agitated — more agitated than I had seen him before. He seemed to be haunted by voices — demons, he called them. He kept saying that he wanted to protect me, and I couldn’t get much sense out of him. He gave me this... this pendant. He told me it was a memory. And then...”

She trailed off, and Ryoko muttered a curse as she saw the glint of wetness on Washu’s cheeks.

“And then he died.” She said softly. “Didn’t he?”

“Yes.” Washu raised her eyes to her daughter’s, nodding her head. “He jumped from a ledge and even with all my magic, I couldn’t save him. I was too late... he was dead by the time I reached him.”

“Is that why you hate your magic so much?” Ryoko wondered. Washu shook her head.

“I always hated it. It was a stigma, being Kii.” She said with a frown. “But it didn’t endear me to it any, I’ll tell you that. I could have handled anything with Mikamo by my side, Ryoko. Madness, danger, intrigue — you name it. But the one thing I wasn’t geared up to handle was losing him. I had let myself love him far too much by that point. I didn’t know what to do.”

Ryoko sighed.

“I don’t think you need to explain.” She reflected. “I think I’ve felt it, before. When Hotsuma had me in his world, I thought Tenchi was dead. I know what you must have felt.”

“Yes, probably you do.” Washu agreed, a faint smile touching her lips. “Your weakness for love isn’t something from your father. You inherited that from me, I’m afraid. And you will probably love Tenchi so long as you exist, no matter what befalls the two of you in the future. Even after all this time, I still love Mikamo with all my heart. I took the pendant to Kihaku with me because I thought I was going to die. I took it so he’d know I’d waited for him — silly and sentimental as it seems, I want him to know that I will always wait for him... however long I live.”

She laughed shakily, dashing her tears away.

“Look at me.” She reproached herself, shaking her head. “Collapsing like this in front of you. As if you need more material to use against me, next time we fight.”

“I wouldn’t use this against you.” Ryoko said seriously, and Washu stared at her, shock clear in her eyes. “I’m not quite that much of a baby, you know. Or that much of a bitch.”

Washu sighed.

“I’m sorry.” She acknowledged. “I guess I know that. I’m just not used to being vulnerable. Or talking about Mikamo. I’ve locked the memories away, like so many others. It’s hard to draw them out again — I don’t deal with grief so well as maybe I should. It just reminds me that I’ve always been more or less alone, and anyone who draws too close to me has invariably been lost. So maybe that’s one reason why I keep my distance from you. If you’re my daughter, Ryoko-chan, I can lose you, too. If you’re not...”

She trailed off, and Ryoko snorted.

“I’m stronger than that. I’m not about to die or anything dumb like that and I don’t believe in bad luck or curses.” She said frankly. “I’m not that kind of superstitious pirate, so you better know that now. My mother taught me better than that — at least, I thought she did. Didn’t she?”

“Perhaps she did.” Washu raised a faint smile. “You surprise me, musume-chan. More and more as time goes on.”

“I know that Kagato was my father.” Ryoko said carefully. “And

obviously you believe Kagato drove this Mikamo to kill himself. So I can see why you'd pull back from me, or even from thinking about me when I was a baby. I get that. It makes sense. But..."

"I'm sure that Mikamo's death wasn't suicide. I'm sure that, whatever the gems had done, Kagato did something more to him to create that frenzy of panic." Washu said grimly. "And that's why I swore revenge on him, there and then. I think Kagato understood I was a dangerous opponent, because he tried to have me killed on two occasions, after I left Jurai with his precious gemstones. Once was with a powerful substance that had hallucinogenic qualities — something Mikamo and I had worked on, and which later became the foundation of Jurai's notorious truth serum. Kagato couldn't kill me, but he could make me see things that weren't there. I'm certain that's what he did to Mikamo. But being Kii saved me. Mikamo wasn't so lucky."

"So the universe has you to thank for truth serum too, huh?" Ryoko said ruefully. "I should have guessed."

She sighed heavily.

"And so I was your revenge? The weapon created to take the guy out?"

"Yes. That's what you were." Washu nodded. "But..."

"But...?"

"I knew you had Kagato's genes, but it didn't make a difference to me." Washu sighed, burying her head in her hands. "I was still a mother watching my daughter grow. I had wanted a family with Mikamo so very badly, Ryoko. Part of me wonders even now whether I chose to exact my revenge in the way I did because of some subconscious need to have a child of my own. To know I wasn't completely on my own. Even though I couldn't keep you — I still wanted to bring you to life. There are a million more rational ways to have gone about trying to kill him. But I chose to clone a baby from his genes and mine. I don't think it was the scientist in me that decided that. I think it was the woman."

"Does that mean I'm not just your creation, then?" Ryoko asked hesitantly. Washu grimaced.

"You are Ryoko Hakubi, aren't you?" She asked softly. Ryoko nodded.

"Well, yes, but..."

“And that’s the name I chose to give you. Ryoko.” Washu smiled. “Not a project number or even just a letter. I gave you a name before you were even born. Of course you were my daughter. And you still are. Even if you do drive me insane a lot of the time. Why else would I stay on the Earth? My family is here. True, it isn’t quite the family I wanted with Mikamo, but it is a family. And it does include you. Crazy as it seems, my interference is always out of maternal concern. So I’m a scientist, and sometimes my curiosity breaks through. But you’re not a ‘thing’ to me, Ryoko-chan. You never were. It’s just difficult to remember that time, that’s all. I distance myself from your birth only because of Mikamo’s memory, and the intense emotions I had to deal with then. Not because I don’t care about you.”

“I see.” Ryoko’s eyes flickered briefly with emotion, then she smiled, getting to her feet and pulling her mother up with her.

“Then I guess it doesn’t matter when my birthday is.” She reflected. “It never really did, you know. I just... I’d rather know you are my mother, than know a day or a year I was born.”

“Well, maybe. But I did lie to you. I do remember exactly the time you took your first breath.” Washu said softly. “And while I’m being honest with you, I will be completely honest. In Juraian years, you’d be twenty three years old now — but approaching twenty four. You were born the first day of the Startica Festival, because I knew that Kagato would be distracted by the festivities on Jurai if I chose that day to give you life. It was a way to get you and Kichi safely to Yubisu while his back was turned. So now you know, don’t you?”

“Startica.” Ryoko opened her eyes in surprise. “Really?”

“Really.” Washu nodded. “I don’t pretend to understand what the celebration signifies, but it is almost ironic that you should be born then, when you are going to marry a Prince of that planet.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Ryoko smiled. “Thank you for telling me, Washu. In a way, it doesn’t matter — but in another way, I’m glad to know the truth. About everything. We’ve never had a conversation like this before, and we probably never will again — neither one of us are given to it. But it’s all right... after all, now I know.”

“Yes, now you do.” Washu took the pirate’s hand in hers, squeezing it gently, and then loosing it from her grip. “And I’d appreciate it if we didn’t discuss it again. Particularly not Mikamo.”

“You can rely on me not to.” Ryoko told her soberly. “Losing Tenchi is the worst thing I can imagine. I won’t be dragging up any skeletons for you, not even when we fight. I promise. It’s off limits.”

“You really have grown up a tremendous amount since you first met that young man, you know.” Washu reflected. Ryoko eyed her self-consciously.

“Now you do sound like my mother.” She said ruefully. Washu laughed, nodding her head.

“I suppose.” She agreed amiably, retrieving the chain and the photograph and returning them to her pocket. “Although talking to you about this has made me resolved not to hide Mikamo’s memory so much as I have been. I’m going to fix the chain he gave me, and then I can keep him with me all the time. I think he’d have preferred that, to being shut away. After all, I’m the only one who can keep him alive now.”

“It makes me realise how important Tenchi really is.” Ryoko said pensively. “And how scared I really am to lose him.”

“Well, I’ll do my best to make sure you don’t.” Washu assured her. “Every mother wants their daughter to be happy, after all. And he does love you, despite everything you’ve been and everything you are. He accepts you for who you are, just as Mikamo accepted me.”

She smiled wistfully.

“And now I have to get back to work, and keep an eye on the patient.” She added. “He may rouse soon, and he has a lot of things to acclimatise to. I’m proud of the way you helped him too, you know. It surprised me, in some ways, but then I guess I realised that you do have a rogue’s honour, and you’d recognise a kindred spirit in trouble. Even if it put your life at risk. You and Tenchi aren’t so different, not in the things that count. I need to remember that — that even though your Jurai blood was tainted, an element of Tsunami runs through you as well.”

“I don’t know about that.” Ryoko’s cheeks pinkened. “I wasn’t keen to be blown to bits either, you know. And I remembered what happened when Kihaku blew a gasket. It released Yugi and we had to contend with her delusions instead. I figure it’s best to stop anything like that happening again. That’s all.”

She frowned, moving back towards Zakari’s bedside.

“He really will be all right, won’t he?”

“He will live.” Washu agreed, eying her keenly.

“What will you tell him?”

“About what, exactly?”

“His genetics. Tokimi. That stuff.”

“Whatever he asks to know.” Washu shrugged her shoulders. “But if he doesn’t ask, I’ll let it lie. It’s up to him, not up to us what he knows about his past, after all.”

“True.” Ryoko agreed absently. “I guess that’s something we all have the right to choose — how much we want to know about who we are.”

“What do you suppose is happening in there?”

Tenchi cast a glance towards the doorway of the lab, uttering a sigh as he leant back against the wall. “They’ve been inside for ages, Yume — do you suppose something’s happened? Maybe this Zakari isn’t to be trusted after all — perhaps we should...”

“Perhaps you should calm down.” Yume rested a gentle hand on her companion’s shoulder, and he turned, meeting her amused gaze with a rueful one of her own. “I know that Ryoko has been missing and you were worried about her, but really, I think Washu and Ryoko need some time. And as for Zakari, I doubt he’ll be getting up just yet. His body has been badly damaged by the constant strain of all that power locked up within him. Washu and I worked hard to resolve the problem and stabilise him, and we succeeded — but I’ll be very surprised if the man will be able to get up this side of tomorrow. If then, even. He has to rely on his natural strength too, now — to heal the wounds that all that pressure has left behind.”

“I know you’re right.” Tenchi sighed again. “I just feel so helpless, you know? Like Ryoko took this right out of anyone’s hands, and well, even though I understand why she did it... I find it hard to deal with, even so.”

“Maybe you’re a little bit jealous, too.” Yume suggested lightly, taking him carefully by the hand and leading him into the front salon, ushering him down into a seat. “There, it’s more comfortable to wait in here, after all.”

“Jealous?” Tenchi stared. “Of a man who might yet be her brother? Yume, you can’t be serious.”

“I’m serious.” Yume settled herself on the floor, crossing her legs as she gazed up at him pensively. “You’re quite protective over Ryoko, and in recent times, you’ve rushed off to her rescue. You risked your life to save her when Hotsuma had her in his world, and I know that you were eager to launch yourself into the firing line again yesterday,

when we went to that planet. But Ryoko didn't need saving — she was the one doing the rescuing. And you're not quite sure how to handle that... not really."

"Ryoko is strong." Tenchi looked taken aback. "She doesn't generally need saving, Yume. More times than not in the past she's fought her own corner without needing me to back her up."

"But you've always been there, to back her up." Yume said composedly. "Her knight in shining armour, with the Light Hawk Wings of Tsunami to defend her against her enemies."

"You have a very romanticised view of our battle history." Tenchi ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't think I've ever truly used the Light Hawk Wings to protect Ryoko. In fact, the first time I used them, I more or less used them against her — Kagato had her under his spell and she almost killed me. I don't think you can say I have a complex about protecting my fiancée from harm. If that's what you're suggesting, then you need to review your understanding of human interactions. It's not that at all. I was just worried about her. That's all."

"Mmm." Yume tilted her head on one side, eying him keenly.

"What?" Tenchi stared at her. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Perhaps I didn't mean it in the way that you understood it." Yume said quietly. "Tsunami's magic is more than just the white blades you projected when Washu was in trouble. It's part of your whole being — it shines from you, which is why we're all so drawn to being near you. Ryoko, me, even Washu, I would guess. We all know that there are a lot of people with Juraian magic, but you're beyond that. You have Tsunami's blades because you have compassion and understanding beyond all of the others. She has faith in you and your ability to see the best in people. That's why she chose you — because you're a peaceful person by nature."

"Which means?"

"You went looking for Ryoko expecting to fight." Yume said gently. "You anticipated that she'd put herself in her usual impulsive battle situation, and that she needed your help. But Ryoko reasoned her way out of it on her own. She prevented a battle, and she probably prevented a lot of people dying — certainly Zakari's death — by her actions. She took your role, and you really don't know how to react to it. After all, you've always been the one who looks for the good in the opposition. Not Ryoko."

Tenchi sighed.

"I guess it is a bit surreal," he admitted. "Not that I'm not happy to have her back, but you have a point. I wouldn't have expected her to react in that way."

"In a million years, you would not have been able to reason with Zakari, or talk him down the way she did," Yume reflected. "Because you can't possibly understand his past the way that she can. In a way it connects them — whether they're siblings or not. And I don't think you're quite comfortable with that — that someone else might have reached out and befriended Ryoko rather than befriending you."

"You make me sound like an arrogant, controlling idiot!" Tenchi reacted indignantly to this, and Yume laughed.

"No, I don't mean that," She said playfully. "Calm down... or I'll think you and she have truly swapped personalities. But even in the time I've been living with you, I've noticed changes in both of you — the closer you get, the more Ryoko seems to reach out to people where maybe she wouldn't have done before. Your influence made her able to help Zakari, you know. You can't complain when it results in something like this. I think that, regardless of what happens now, Ryoko and Zakari will share a bond of sorts. And you'll just have to accept that. Not everyone is going to see Ryoko as an oddball and an eccentric... she has as much to give the world as you do."

"I've always known that, Yume."

"I know, but you've also had to defend her to many people who haven't," Yume rested her chin in her hands, eying him searchingly. "Haven't you?"

"Well, I suppose I have," Tenchi sighed, leaning back against the soft support of the chair.

"That's no healthy basis for a relationship, you know," Yume shrugged. "For Ryoko to always rely on you to stand up for her to everyone you meet. It's bound to have an impact on her confidence, as well as a strain on your bond."

"You really think that's been the case?" Tenchi eyed her doubtfully. "That Ryoko has depended on me in that respect?"

"Think it over," Yume shrugged. "She'll fight her own battles, but she looks to you to form her friendships."

"I suppose so," Tenchi looked surprised. "I suppose most of the friends she does have she has through her connection to me. Sakura,

Hiroshi — they're college friends of mine in Osaka. She formed bonds with Ayeka and Sasami because they were stuck here together, at my house, and she didn't want to have to leave. She's accepted you into the family, because I wanted you to stay. And Washu... she's never quite known how to read Washu. Maybe you have a point."

"Most of Ryoko's acquaintances over the years have tried to kill her. That's true, isn't it?" Yume asked softly. Tenchi nodded slowly.

"Yes. I guess they have. Being a pirate is none too safe or secure, after all."

"So, Ryoko having forged a positive bond with someone on her own is a good thing." Yume said simply, getting to her feet and stretching her arms over her head. "And you need to just accept it. Zakari's not going to steal her away from you, after all. They may be siblings, but even if not, I know he has a woman already. I wanted to do my bit to help him too, considering our history, and Ryoko asked me last night if I could track this girl down, find out where she was and whether she was safe. Besides, if you really do expect to marry Ryoko, she needs to grow up beyond the pirate who throws a fit and attacks everyone she sees. You've been a good influence on her. Don't you think?"

"Perhaps your understanding of human interaction is better than mine is, on reflection." Tenchi said ruefully. "I'll think it over. And I'm not going to give Zakari a hard time, whether or not Ryoko chooses to remain friendly with him after all this. I mean, you're right. And if she can forgive him for abducting her, then I can. So I will."

"Good boy." Yume smiled, mischief sparkling in her lilac eyes.

"And Washu? Do you think she will settle things up with Ryoko properly, if we leave them be?"

"I think that's Washu's intention." Yume's expression became serious and she nodded her head. "She's just as bad at Ryoko at trusting people, but I think they do need to clear the air between them. They have too many misunderstandings."

"Then I suppose we'll let them talk." Tenchi sighed, getting to his feet. "Perhaps I'll walk up to the shrine and see if Jii-chan needs any help. Noone needs us here right at the moment, after all — want to come with me?"

"Sure, Tenchi-kun. That sounds like a wise idea." Yume nodded her head. "It would be my pleasure. Let's go."

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

“You can’t possibly *still* be asleep!”

Zakari opened his eyes, blinking against the light as he made out the blurry silhouette of a woman, coming closer towards him as he struggled to get a hold of his bearings. He reached out his hands around him, meeting soft bed-linen on each side and he hesitated, confused as the sound of amused laughter rang out around him.

He blinked once more, fighting to bring both of his eyes into the same focus, and as he did so, he recognised his visitor.

“Ryoko!”

“You’re smart today.” Ryoko dropped down gracefully beside him, crossing her legs as she eyed him keenly. “You’re still in one piece, you notice. Good news is that you’re going to stay that way. At least, now Washu’s glued you back together. You’ve slept the clock around — talk about taking life easily!”

“I see.” Zakari struggled into a more upright position, gazing at his hands as he did so. Sure enough, he could no longer feel the burning, prickling energy beneath the surface of his skin, and at length he smiled, meeting her gaze with his.

“I think I should thank you, although I’m not sure quite what for.” He admitted. “My memory is a little hazy — but I know you had some part in this, so thank you.”

“Forget about it.” Ryoko seemed embarrassed, dismissing it with a flick of her fingers. “It wasn’t really about you, you know. I mean, it was making a point — that just because someone was dumb enough to jam us together, it doesn’t mean we don’t have the right to live. That’s all. That’s why I made Washu fix your genetics... don’t think it was out of any latent sentimentality.”

“All right.” Zakari eyed her thoughtfully, then he nodded his head. “I’ll believe your words and say nothing more of it.”

He paused, then,

“Before we left that planet, I heard you talking. You thought I was out cold, but I could still hear your voices, somewhere in the distance.

You're my sister, aren't you, Ryoko? In more than just scientific principle."

"I don't know." Ryoko looked taken aback. "That's the truth, Zakari. I don't. Not even Washu does. She didn't have anything to do with your creation, so she can't be sure what Clay did or didn't use to design you. Your genetics are pretty messed up, so she just can't tell for sure if we share DNA. I'd forget about the whole family angle, if I were you. We're connected by the fact we're both people's projects — but I'd leave it there. You don't need any more complications, and nor do I."

"Perhaps that's true." Zakari reflected. He smiled, his eyes lighting up with genuine warmth as he surveyed her.

"So maybe I see things a little more clearly, now." He added. "Now I can think properly again, I can see that you were right, in the long run. And I do deserve to have my life, even if it began in an unusual way. You know, you called me Zakari since the start — no matter what I said, you still insisted on calling me that. Now I find I'm grateful for it. You at least didn't see me as a monster — even if it was what I had become."

"Well, it would have been a bit strange, considering that I was also lab-born." Ryoko shrugged carelessly, wrapping her arms around her knees as she contemplated his words. "And I told you, I've always been Ryoko. I'm not a robot or a machine, so I have a name and an identity. Washu is my mother, she's not my creator — because machines have creators, not people. And I was a pirate, and a vandal, and I looted and pillaged my way through thirteen planetary systems before I met Tenchi, down here on the Earth. But those things were my doing... my decisions. I've never been under anyone else's control, and that's the truth."

"And when you faced down Kagato? Clay's records were quite explicit, based on the data he had stolen from Washu."

"I chose to face down Kagato." Ryoko said quietly. "Of my own free will. I chose to, and so did Tenchi. We did it because we needed to do it. Not because I was custom-built to take on the job. And in the end, it was Tenchi who took Kagato down. Not me. I was there, but I wasn't the deciding factor. So it wasn't my destiny to kill him, after all."

"Do you not believe in destiny at all, then?" Zakari asked her softly. Ryoko spread her hands.

"Tenchi is my destiny." She said simply, a pinkish tint touching her

cheeks as she spoke. “He always has been — my soulmate, and the one I was drawn to this planet to find. Otherwise... no. I don’t believe that other people have the right to dictate your life to you. Whether you’re born normally or like we were — life is for living, not for following orders. Do what you want to do and be happy. The universe might explode tomorrow.”

“That’s philosophical.”

“Living with a woman like Washu, it’s an ever-present possibility.”

“I see.” Zakari chuckled. “Is she really as crazy as the rumours say?”

“Sometimes I think she’s crazier.” Ryoko looked thoughtful. “But then again, I suppose she’s just eccentric. She’s hard to understand, that’s all. I don’t know if I ever fully will. But she has her limits, unlike Clay. And she knows her science. I know for sure now that she didn’t create me just to be her weapon, Zakari. Sometimes I wondered if she did, but now I don’t think so. She took time and care over me, and I know that she created me as much because she wanted family as she did because she wanted to bring down Kagato. I suppose that’s why she’s my mother, not my creator. At the end of the day, I know she gives a damn. Which is nice to know, even if we do fight.”

“Perhaps you are the luckier of us, then.” Zakari reflected, eying his battle-worn hands as he did so.

“What will you do, now?” Ryoko asked. “Washu said that most of your magic is gone, now... it was too strong and it overwhelmed you too much. She thinks you had too much magic for your body to properly deal with — your development was too rushed and the mixture too potent. So you don’t have your powers any more, not really... I hope that’s not going to be a problem.”

“Honestly, I’m glad to know they’re more or less gone.” Zakari admitted. “I never asked for them or wanted them.”

“Will you go back to your scientific career?”

Zakari looked haunted.

“How can I?” He murmured. “After what happened, do you think I could ever go back?”

“You quit way too easily.” Ryoko snorted. “You were willing to give up your life before, and now you’re wanting to run away from your job and your woman, too? You really are a wimp underneath all that power of yours, aren’t you? For heaven’s sake, get a backbone. It

wasn't even like the explosion was your fault and trust me, I've done worse damage than that in a raid before now!"

"I hurt Komei, Ryoko. I put her in a coma."

"And the first night I met Tenchi, I threatened to barbeque him." Ryoko said serenely. "Yet here we are. So what if you did? You at least did it by accident. If she really loves you, she'll forgive you... you couldn't help it."

"She might not even recover."

"Well, that's where you're wrong." Ryoko said frankly. "Yume's been hunting through medical records looking for this girl... she wasn't easy to find, but she's smart and persistent and she did it. I think she feels some kind of overriding guilt over you, if you want to know the truth. She's another one with way too much on her mind at any one time. Komei Morioka... isn't that the girl's name?"

"Yes, but..."

"But read." Ryoko dropped a file down on the bedcovers, casting him a smile. "So long as you still can, with those weird eyes of yours. Now your magic is gone, can you even see properly? I know that Washu thinks there was something weird and Kii about your left one, so I guess it's possible you can't."

"I can see just fine, thank you." Zakari nodded, scooping up the file with a mixture of bewilderment and disbelief. "But... how did you...?"

"Washu's a pretty top class hacker and Yume's a good student." Ryoko said flippantly. "She found her for you. So now you've no excuse not to go see her. She's been moved from the private hospital her family had her in, so she's obviously doing better. You should smarten up and go visit her. Shouldn't you?"

"Ryoko..." Zakari hesitated, then he reached out, clasping her by the hand. The pirate started, staring at him in consternation, and he grinned.

"I think you and I are brother and sister." He said quietly, amused by the expression in her eyes. "When I look at you, and meet your gaze, I see amber eyes. Amber is not a common colour, but it binds us together. My right eye is the same shade as yours — and when I was on Heiwa, people would often comment on it. The scientist in me thinks that there's a connection, even if Washu isn't able — or doesn't want — to prove it definitively."

"I'm not sure." Ryoko faltered. "I mean, it's true, about the eyes. I'd

noticed it too, when the idea of us being kin first came into the equation. But it could just as easily have been a genetic coincidence. If someone designs you to order, you can't rely on the way you look to trace your roots, after all."

"But even though my magic is gone, my other eye still sees through to your soul and tells me that you think the same way." Zakari said softly. "Whether you'll tell me so or not. That is truly why you're helping me, and I'm grateful. You are a revelation, Ryoko-neesan. And I won't forget you for that."

"Did you just call me... neesan?" Ryoko blinked, and Zakari laughed.

"I did." He agreed. "And I will again. After all, if we're not machines, we're people. And if we're people, we can be family. Isn't that how it works?"

"I think all that energy fried your tiny brain." Ryoko said frankly. Zakari shrugged.

"Maybe." He admitted. "But this eye of mine always sees it as it is, you know. And I think I'd be quite happy, to call you my sister."

"I suppose that's the Kii in you." Ryoko said reflectively. She shrugged her shoulders, spreading her hands in a gesture of submission.

"Well, at the very least, we're adoptive cousins." She acknowledged. "I was born from Washu's DNA and you from Tokimi's... Washu is pretty sure about that, at the very least. I suppose whatever the truth about the rest of your DNA, we are still, in a sense, family."

"So this Tokimi is *definitely* my... my mother?"

"You *want* a mother, now, is that it?" Ryoko's eyes danced mischievously, and Zakari looked rueful.

"I'd like to know." He admitted. "At the very least, whether she's still alive."

"Yes." Ryoko hesitated, then, "Zakari, Washu doesn't have an excuse, really, for creating me. She did it for her own reasons, but she knew what she was doing. And I'm settled with the whole deal now. I understand those reasons better, because we've finally hashed it out between us. You won't ever be able to do that with Tokimi. It might suck, but I don't think Washu will let you, and I'm not sure I'd advise you to try."

“Meaning?”

“When Tokimi had Clay in her service, she was under the influence of very, very dark magic.” Ryoko said slowly. “I guess you might say she was under a spell. Washu is pretty certain that everything she did during that time was not her will but the will of the magic. I don’t know enough about it to know, but I do know that since the spell was broken, she’s been a different person. So maybe Washu is right. Either way, Tokimi likely doesn’t even remember you, or why she wanted you to exist in the first place. Even if she did charge Clay to create you, and even if she did give him her genetic material with which to work, she won’t be able to tell you her reasons. She won’t know what they were, and probably they weren’t her ideas at all.”

“I see.” Zakari looked thoughtful. “So in other words, don’t go off in a mad, paranoid fit in the hopes of killing her out of revenge. Right?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Ryoko agreed, amused. “But listen, Zakari. Seriously. When the spell over Tokimi was broken, the magic had done something to her mind. She’s not quite in the same world as the rest of us. She isn’t crazy, but she’s not... the same. She’s more like, well, a child herself in some ways. I don’t think she’d grasp all the concepts she’d need to grasp, in order to accept you as her son. I think it would be beyond her.”

“Another victim of overwhelmingly powerful magic?” Zakari ruminated. “Perhaps my own wild rages can be traced back to the same source. I feel bad for her, Ryoko. And even more keen to meet her, at least once. Even if it is just that — a meeting. After all, the word ‘mother’ doesn’t mean anything really. Not to me. I’d just like to know... if just to register that not all of my past is within that laboratory.”

“Well, speak to Washu.” Ryoko shrugged. “See what she says. She’s protective of Tokimi, but if you’re nice to her, she might let you. In the meantime, you have a girl to go see... at least, you’ll be some ingrate if you don’t go find this Komei girl after all the work Yume did to find her for you.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” Zakari pursed his lips. “If you really think it’s worth pursuing. I mean, if you were her, would you forgive me?”

“I think you’ll find I already did, and you did hit me pretty hard with your power as well.” Ryoko said acidly. “Besides, if she’s worth anything at all, she’ll understand. She’ll accept you for who you are and she’ll be able to move past it. Just like Tenchi has forgiven me the thousands of times I’ve accidentally blown up bits of his house. It’s

just how things are.”

“He must love you very much.”

“I’d like to think so.” Ryoko’s cheeks pinkened. “Not that it’s your business. But if you’d hurt him in your little rampage, I wouldn’t be so forgiving now. He means the world to me, and I’m not ashamed to admit that.”

Zakari eyed her thoughtfully for a moment, then he pushed back his covers, sliding his legs over the side of his pallet as he struggled to stand up.

“Hey, where are you going?” Ryoko demanded, holding out her hands to steady him. “Washu said you should be resting.”

“I’ve wasted enough time.” Zakari said frankly. “I can stand, so I’ve no excuse to hang around and outstay my welcome on this planet of yours. And I’m sure your Prince probably feels uncomfortable enough having another man around the place. After all, I saw the look on his face when you stepped between us. He couldn’t believe his eyes, that you defended me.”

“Tenchi isn’t the jealous type.” Ryoko shook her head, but Zakari offered a rueful smile.

“If it were Komei, I know how I’d feel about it.” He said dryly. “I think you underestimate how he feels about you, you know. His expression said it all — I think he thought you’d chosen against him. And I don’t want to be the cause of any domestic disharmony. I have loose ends of my own to pursue, and I should be pursuing them — not adding to your problems by hanging on here.”

“You don’t have to leave on my account, Zakari-san.”

A fresh voice broke through the conversation and both pirate and scientist turned, seeing Tenchi watching them from the doorway. He smiled at their surprise, crossing the lab towards them, and pausing a few feet from the bed. “You look tired, and I’m sure you could use some more time resting. You have been pretty badly hurt, after all — you shouldn’t be in such a hurry.”

“Tenchi.” Ryoko offered her fiance a smile, and he reached down to take her hand, squeezing it tightly.

“I wasn’t meaning to eavesdrop, but I wasn’t sure when to interrupt.” He admitted. “Ryoko, I know it’s important to you — this man and your friendship with him. Whether he is your brother or not, I don’t want him to feel that he has to leave because of me. If you

want him to stay, well, he's welcome here as long as he needs. I don't mind."

Zakari narrowed his eyes, taking in Tenchi's demeanour thoughtfully for a moment. Then he smiled, warmth lighting up his unusual eyes as he held out a hand to the newcomer.

"Thank you, Tenchi-sama. I appreciate it." He said softly. "And I'm sorry for interfering in your life in the first place. I've caused you a lot of problems, and I made you worry about Ryoko — I apologise for that."

"I'm used to being worried about Ryoko. It sort of comes with the territory." Tenchi said, sending his fiancée an amused smile, and Ryoko reddened.

"That's a nice thing to say." She objected. "I was abducted and missing and you can still say something like that? Shame on you, Mr Masaki!"

Zakari laughed.

"I misjudged you." He said pensively, meeting Tenchi's gaze with a keen one of his own. "I can see now that Ryoko was right. You *have* accepted her, regardless of her background and her past. And if you can accept her, maybe there's hope that I can be accepted, also. I'm not going to try and hide any more — or return to the lab on Heiwa, because I don't want to spend my life shut away in a box trying to solve other people's scientific dilemmas. But I am going to find Komei, and I am going to find out whether she can accept me as easily as you can accept my sister. It gives me hope, anyway."

"You did it again. You called me sister." Ryoko objected, and Zakari smiled at her unrepentantly.

"And I told you, that's what you are to me from hereon in." He said pragmatically. "I don't really have a family, but I'm beginning to create one. And I'm starting with you."

He flexed his hands, glancing at the scars that littered his skin.

"I don't want to be Zakari Kure any more, either." He added reflectively. "Ryoko, tell me — what is Tokimi's family name? If she is truly my genetic mother, I'd like to identify myself with her rather than that bastard Clay. You did say, after all, that Tokimi was under a spell when I was born. And if you can be Ryoko Hakubi, I'd like to know who I truly am as well."

"Isn't Tokimi just a Hakubi, like Washu?" Tenchi looked startled.

Ryoko frowned, shaking her head.

“No. She isn’t.” She said slowly. “Washu said it to me earlier in the lab, when we were talking. She said... Tokimi was the last survivor of a tribe, and it had a different name. Let me think... it wasn’t Hakubi. Tokimi wasn’t a Hakubi. She was adopted, remember? That’s why she went so nuts when Kihaku took her as Priestess. She didn’t have what it took to control the magic.”

“That’s true.” Tenchi acknowledged. “Although I’d never thought about it in terms of who Tokimi’s people were or weren’t.”

“Inoue.” Ryoko snapped her fingers. “That was it. Tokimi was the last survivor of the Inoue tribe. That’s her name, Zakari. Tokimi Inoue.”

“Then that’s the name I’ll use from hereon in.” Zakari said decidedly. “Zakari Kure can die a death. I’ll begin afresh as Zakari Inoue, and hope it brings me better luck.”

“Tokimi is a peaceful, gentle soul. I’m sure that it will.” Tenchi nodded.

“So, are you going to leave now?” Ryoko asked. Zakari eyed her keenly.

“Do you want me to stay?” He asked softly. Ryoko glanced at Tenchi, who spread his hands.

“I told you. You’re as welcome here as any friend is.” He said simply. “Let your wounds heal a little longer, Zakari-san — there’s no hurry to be off across space, and you don’t want to undo all of Washu’s hard work by rushing into the fray.”

“I suppose not.” Zakari acknowledged, sinking back down onto his pallet. “All right. If you’re sure — I will stay a little longer on this Earth of yours. I’d like to see it, if nothing else. It’s meant to be quite beautiful, and I’ve not had a lot of beauty in the past few years. Heiwa is an enclosed, shuttered planet where people live in fear of their sun’s rays. It would be nice to walk somewhere which was still alive.”

“Then you’re definitely in the right place.” Ryoko settled herself more comfortably against her fiancé’s body, and he slipped an absent arm around her waist. “The Earth might have its limits in scientific circles, but I don’t think there’s any world in this universe that can match it for beauty.”

“Meantime, you should probably rest.” Tenchi added. “Else Washu will be after the both of us for disturbing you. You are her patient,

after all — and we're not supposed to flit in and out of her lab at random like this anyway. She can get a bit hot under the collar sometimes, when she's got her mind set on something."

"Then you should probably not linger." Zakari relaxed back on his pillows. "And I'll do as you say. But one last thing, Oneesan, before you go."

"Yes?" Ryoko asked quizzically, pinkening again at the appellation. "What is it?"

"I'm in your debt, and if I can ever one day repay it, I'll do so." Zakari told her. "I won't stay on the Earth beyond a few days, and I will go seek Komei and hope that she won't turn me away. But if you ever need my assistance — scientific or otherwise — I'll be willing to come to your aid. Remember that... even without my magic, there might be a time I can be of help to you the way you have been to me."

"Oh, shut up already, will you?" It was impossible for Ryoko to go any redder, and Tenchi chuckled in amusement at her discomfiture. "If I'd known you were going to be all fussy and flowery about it, I wouldn't have bothered. Just get fit and go find your woman already, okay? And stop saying silly things that don't mean anything. All right? Yeesh — get some sleep. I'll see you later — if you've got a hold of your senses by that time."

With that she flickered and disappeared from the lab, leaving the two men alone together. For a moment there was silence, then Tenchi offered his companion a rueful smile.

"That's Ryoko for you." He said simply, and Zakari laughed.

"So I see." He agreed. "But I meant every word. Make sure she knows it, will you? If I can repay the debt at any time, then I will."

"Maybe you and she are siblings, after all." Tenchi reflected thoughtfully. "That sounds like the sort of thing she would say, too. She hates the idea of being beholden to anyone — and she'd be the first person up and out of bed after an injury, keen to race across the galaxy and do whatever needed to be done. Maybe you do share more than just a connection through Tokimi, Zakari-san."

"Well, I'm not sure how she sees it, but I have no objections to the idea." Zakari said evenly. "She's challenged me to think twice about every single one of my preconceived ideas, and I owe her for it. In a sense I was as prejudiced as Clay was, because I saw myself as he saw me, not as I wanted the world to see me. She's one of a kind, Tenchi-sama... and I'm glad for her that you could see it too. She deserves to

be happy, after all. And she really is devoted to you.”

“Yes, well, we’ve been through a lot of things together since our first meeting.” Tenchi admitted sheepishly. “I guess it cements our bond more than anything. Get some rest, Zakari-san — do as Ryoko advises. And don’t worry about how long you’re here — leave when you feel fit, not for any other reason. All right?”

“All right.” Zakari nodded solemnly. “And thank you.”

Tenchi offered him another smile, then withdrew from the lab, leaving Zakari to ponder their conversation alone. He lay back against the cool fabric of the pillows, closing his eyes as he ran over things in his mind.

“I’m tired and battered, but I’m alive and I don’t feel like I’m holding back such waves of energy any more.” He murmured. “It’s all gone, and I’m finally free of it for good. Washu might have been the one who fixed my body, but it’s Ryoko to whom I really owe my life. I guess I should bear in mind that I’m alive, regardless of how that happened. And I should just make the most of it for as long as I have it, not worry about wasting it taking petty revenge on people and things that don’t matter. As soon as I’m well, well, I’ll track down Komei and find out how she feels. If she can forgive me, then I’ll be content, but if she doesn’t, I’ll find a way to move past it and carry on. After all, there’s a whole universe out there and I’ve barely even begun to touch it. I want to see as many things as I can, and do as much as I’m able. For the first time in my life I’m actually going to try living, and see how it goes!”

“I’m glad you said it was all right for Zakari to stay here a while longer.” As Tenchi made his way up the path towards RyuOh’s tree, he heard his fiancée’s voice and she dropped gracefully down from the tree branches, looping her arms around him with a warm grin. “I wasn’t sure if you’d mind. Zakari said he thought you were bothered by him, and I’m glad you’re not. It’s weird for me, this whole thing — but I don’t want us to fight over it.”

“We’ve been a bit role-reversed.” Tenchi said ruefully, sinking down against the roots of the tree and pulling his companion down with him. “And I’m only human. You go bringing home strange men, and well, I guess it did bother me a little bit. But it’s all right. I mean, he might be your brother — and even if he isn’t, well, you do share something with him that I probably don’t understand. This is your home as well as mine and you can bring your friends here just as I can

bring mine... I don't want you to think otherwise. You don't have to have my approval to meet other people, after all."

"Even people who steal up on me and abduct me?" Ryoko asked doubtfully, and Tenchi laughed.

"All right, so that bit I had issue with." He admitted. "But you've forgiven it so so will I. I'm not jealous of Zakari, Ryoko. It's all right — really it is."

"Good." Ryoko leant up against him, and Tenchi glanced at her, comforted by her closeness. "I don't know why I'm so drawn to help him, or anything like that. Just that I had to do it, and I still feel sort of responsible for him. Perhaps this is what Ayeka feels when something happens to Sasami — it's the big sister gene kicking in. If we even are siblings — we'll never know for sure, because Washu can't isolate that part of his DNA. Still, I suppose that is what I feel like. Like someone has to look out for him, because he's too stupid to do it himself."

Despite himself Tenchi laughed, shaking his head slowly.

"I think he'll be just fine, now he hasn't got all that power addling his brain." He said contemplatively. "And even when he does leave, I think it's probable we'll see the man again some time in the future."

"It wouldn't bother you, then, if we did?"

"No, I don't think so." Tenchi pursed his lips. "He's your family, whatever happens. And that's cool with me. Besides, he's a threat to noone now. It's not like he's putting the Earth in jeopardy by being here."

"True." Ryoko reflected. "I'm probably more dangerous to the Earth, when it comes to it. Or you — you might be even worse, if you lost control of your magic. Zakari is just your average scientist again now. Maybe he still has an element of Tokimi's Kii sight, but otherwise I think he's just an ordinary guy. And that's probably a good thing — he really wasn't all that responsible with all that power."

"You really do sound like his big sister." Tenchi was amused, and Ryoko pinkened.

"Dammit." She muttered. "I guess I do. That's going to have to stop, you know... it's just too weird from start to finish."

"Did you and Washu settle your differences okay?"

"Yes, we did." Ryoko seemed relieved to be onto a different subject, nodding her head. "And I can't repeat most of what she said to you,

because it wasn't exactly for public hearing. But she did tell me when I was born, and how old I am in Jurai years. So this year we can celebrate my birthday, Tenchi-kun. For the first time ever... isn't that neat?"

"Will you tell me that much, then? Or are you going to spring it on me on that day with a demand for an expensive present and a trip somewhere exotic?" Tenchi asked her playfully. Ryoko laughed.

"I'll tell you, but I might still do the other stuff, so be warned." She teased, touching him gently on the cheek. "I still haven't forgotten my promise to make your birthday memorable, so you can't even begin to imagine the things I'm going to dream up for my own. Washu said I was born on the first day of the Startica summer festival, because it was a time Kagato would have been busy with Juraian affairs and less vigilant over other things. And she said that I'd be twenty four next birthday, if you counted it in Jurai years. So there you have it. Now you know."

"Summer, huh?" Tenchi grinned. "Yeah, I can't imagine that you'd have been a winter baby. Somehow winter doesn't suit you at all."

"I should think not. Not with all that snow." Ryoko grimaced at him. "But it's nice to know, anyway. And I understand now, why she didn't want to tell me before. So it's all settled between us. I'm not going to bring it up again. I guess I know that she's my mother, however weird she is. That's what matters. She'll never be Achika-sama, but I can live with that."

"I think you could have done a lot worse for a mother." Tenchi reflected. "You could have ended up with someone like Clay watching over you."

"Very true." Ryoko stifled a shiver. "I thought that man was creepy before, but it's a good thing for him that he's dead now. Else we'd be having serious words."

"One less madman roaming the universe, at the very least." Tenchi agreed.

"So you were really worried about me, Tenchi-kun?"

"Of course I was, you idiot. What do you think?"

"I think I like hearing you say it." Ryoko's eyes twinkled with mischief and she slipped her arms more securely around his neck, pulling him to her level as she kissed him. "Do you have a problem with that?"

“No, no problem at all.” Tenchi grinned back at her, hugging her tightly. “Do you still want to go to Osaka tomorrow? I mean, Sakura and Hiroshi are my friends, and... well...”

“I’d like to think they’re becoming my friends too, Tenchi.” Ryoko shook her head. “So don’t think you’re forcing their company on me. I like them both, even if they are a bit silly about alien things from time to time. And you know I want to go to Osaka — I love Osaka.”

“I just wondered, with Zakari here...”

“Oh come on, Tenchi — you think I’m going to let a little thing like a possible half brother stop me from having a wild time celebrating your birthday?” Ryoko arched her eyebrow. “Do you really know me that little? Get real. Zakari doesn’t need me to nanny him — he’s doing all right and Washu will keep an eye on him. And me, I deserve a party — don’t you think so?”

“Well, I won’t argue with that.” Tenchi laughed. “All right then. Osaka it is!”